

**Intra-active Boundaries: An investigation into the dynamic
interrelationship between the human body and the environment
using painterly media.**

*Although the elements of land and sea were there, the earth had no firmness,
the water no fluidity, there was no brightness in the sky. Nothing had any
lasting shape, but everything got in the way of everything else; for within that
one body, cold warred with hot, soft with hard, and light with heavy.*

Ovid, *Metamorphose*¹

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Abstract

Intra-active boundaries: An investigation into the dynamic interrelationship between the human body and the environment using painterly media.

To acknowledge 'I am this body' ...is not to lock up awareness within the density of a closed and bounded object, for as we shall see, the boundaries of a living body are open and indeterminate; more like membranes than barriers, they define a surface of metamorphosis and exchange.

David Abram, 1996, *The Spell of the Sensuous*, Vintage Books, New York, p.46.

The MFA research addresses the problem of how to aesthetically visualize the interconnection between the human body and the environment through a series of experimental paintings and mixed media. Traditional pictorial approaches, grounded in art world conventions and Cartesian philosophy, tend to portray the human body and landscape as static spaces disconnected from each other. As such, they focus on the representation of discrete spaces/objects rather than the experience of the processes involved between them. There is a vast gap between these traditional concepts and the contemporary redefinition of the nexus between the human and non-human environment suggested by recent philosophical re-conceptualisations of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Gilles Deleuze, Felix Guattari and Michel Serres. This interconnected space was foreshadowed in the philosophy of Merleau-Ponty, who proposed that the perception of reality emerges through the interaction of the body within the world, rather than as the exchange between static objects in a world of empty space, as formulated by René Descartes. This redefinition portrays the relationship of the human self and the non-human world as inextricably one. As Deleuze and Guattari state, “*there is no such thing as either man or nature now, only a process that produces the one within the other*”. More significantly Serres, in his ecological philosophy, directs us to the materiality of the human and the natural as intra-active, defining each other through their mutual interactions, both occupying the same biospheric terrain, the biological sphere that makes life possible on the planet.

The experimental paintings at the heart of the MFA research investigate the way in which we can re-experience human and environmental phenomena, such as bodies and landscapes, in a way that questions conventional assumptions of their separateness. In order to do so, the research first examines the development of landscape art in the West as a reflection of changing human and environmental relations, through the work of selected artists, including JMW Turner and Olafur Eliasson, who have sought to respond to this changing dynamic by exploring the human form as part of an environment implicit with the human body. The research also examines the work of other artists, such as Juul Kraijer and Berlinde de Bruyckere, whose work involves the integration of aspects of the non-human within the human, predicated on an

intention to explore the human condition as opposed to the relationship of the human *with* the natural world.

The research tests the hypothesis, foreshadowed in recent philosophy, that an aesthetic re-formulation of the figure/landscape is needed to better understand the human/environmental interrelationship, via a series of experimental paintings where aspects of the body are fused with aspects of the environment to create an integrated spatial concept that makes visible their interconnection. Framed within an ecological aesthetic that explores the network of relations between human and environmental processes, the research undertakes this interconnection in three ways:

1. Using common intercellular processes – where the intrinsic properties of the raw materials, and their physical interactions used within the painterly techniques, are analogous to the mutual biological processes of interchange between the body and the environment; the forms exist in an ambiguous space inside or outside the body.
2. Integrating sites of the body with geographic sites – fusing specific organs within the body, such as parts of the eye, heart and lungs, with geophysical sites, such as salt lakes, geological strata, plant communities, such that they can be read as one or the other, or both, simultaneously.
3. Creating a terrain that fuses the human and the non-human – amalgamating features of the human and non-human to visualize a new form of topography that embodies a reciprocal biospheric space, a new mutual terrain that cannot be interpreted as separate entities.

These reformulations of processes, forms and imagery, use an integrated spatial concept that embodies an immersive mode of experience. It is immersive in the sense that it prompts recognition of reality as an enveloping interaction occurring between the inside and the outside of the body, between the haptic self and the dynamic exterior world. What this encourages is an aesthetic position where the human self is no longer considered separate from the outside world but rather entangled within it, and vice versa. In this way both are intra-active with each other, defining each other through their interactions.

Chapter 1 – INTRODUCTION

1.1 Aim

The proposed research addresses questions of how the interrelationship between the human and the natural world is conceived, and how this relationship can be visualized in painting and mixed media. Based upon the understanding that this intersection is a site of dynamic interchange between the human corporeal environment and the natural environment, it addresses the limitations of established representational paradigms that present the two as distinct and separate.

The research aims to explore the creative possibilities when the two environments are treated as mutually defining and aims to visualize this relationship as a dynamic process rather than a relationship between static objects. *It envisages the two environments as not preceding their interaction, but rather proposes to explore how they emerge through their specific intra-actions; in short through the specific way they constitute and define each other through their interaction.*²

Using the boundary of the human body as a starting point, the project seeks to examine that area of co-incidence between the inner and outer spaces of both. In fusing recognizable elements of the natural environment and the human body, via painterly media, the research seeks to create a new integrated landscape space, or topography, that is simultaneously human and natural, interior and exterior, as a means to better understand this intra-active relationship.

1.2 Research problem

The research is focused on the understanding that the way we view the environment as something separate from the self is founded upon long held philosophical principles, and that traditional pictorial depictions of landscape in Western art are evidence of, and intrinsic to, this conceptual bifurcation.

The problem is how this estrangement can be reversed, and re-formulated as an interconnection between the human corporeal environment and the natural environment, and how this can be embodied in painting?

Artists have been exploring for some time ways in which this traditional pictorial view can be overturned: how ‘landscape’ can be re-viewed or *re-experienced* as environment, or how the body can be invested into or fused with the landscape. The central concern of this research, however, is the visualisation of this relationship as an intertwining of interconnected entities, where the human and natural become *aspects of the same biospheric*³ space.

The main problem of how to visualise this interrelationship using different painterly methodologies is explained in detail in Chapter 3. As the research developed a secondary problem emerged which

¹ Ovid 8, *Metamorphose*, Innes, MM 1955, (trans.), Penguin, London.

² The neologism ‘intra-action’ signifies the mutual constitution of entangled agencies. In contrast to the usual ‘interaction,’ which assumes that there are separate individual agencies that precede their interaction, the notion of intra-action recognizes that distinct agencies do not precede, but rather emerge through, their intra-action. It is important to note that the ‘distinct’ agencies are only distinct in a relational, not an absolute, sense, that is, agencies are only distinct in relation to their mutual entanglement; they don’t exist as individual elements. For further reading see also: Barad, K 2007, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*, Duke University Press Books Durham and London.

³ In earth science the biosphere is the global sum of all ecosystems making life possible on Earth.

was how to effectively represent the human without using a figurative trope that reinforced rather than reversed the idea of the human as separate. As the research progressed, it became increasingly focused upon the body as a type of sensorial entity, a sensorium, with a spectrum of senses apprehending the environment it occupies and vice-versa, and overt figurative elements were dispensed with. The conflation of scale – of the human with the environmental, and the macro with the micro – was used as a way of fusing the two; different aspects of the human and non-human were amalgamated into a single environment; and painterly processes were used as a way to inhabit both regions simultaneously, and to describe mutual processes of fusion and permeability between the thresholds of these spaces. Ambiguity of space, form and scale became an essential device in blurring the boundaries between the human and the non-human environments, immersing the viewer in sites that were either interior or exterior to the body, or both simultaneously.

1.3 Hypothesis and significance

The research explores how the traditional paradigm which bifurcates the human and the natural, can be aesthetically re-formulated if we collapse the dualistic system that splits the human body from the natural world, the human subject from the non-human object, and present the body and landscape as a single interconnected space.

It is proposed that by examining and dismantling conventions in Western landscape painting that separate the human body from the landscape, and re-presenting these elements – of the figure and the landscape – in radically redefined ways, a more dynamic understanding of the relationship between human corporeal environment and the natural environment may be developed.

If traditional Western landscape can be seen as epitomized in Cartesian dualistic principles - separate objects in empty space - then by recalibrating this vision, enmeshing body and landscape in an interlinked space, a new visual topography is made possible.

By taking parts of the body, its internal organs, its skin, breath, fluids, etc., and fusing these with aspects of the external natural world, its sky and terrain – where the scale of the entities are conflated, and their functions are fused – a new ambiguous spatial concept is constructed: a visual metaphor for a mutually defining inter-relationship between the corporeal and the natural.

Such exploration will lead to new insights into how the two are mutually interdependent, and how these new visual forms can reflect changes in our contemporary awareness of the human/non-human relationship. It may also contribute to shifting conventional understandings, both visual and conceptual, about human and natural interaction.

1.4 Overview of methods

Previous artistic research has focused on the human relationship with the environment and how it is changing as a result of new scientific discoveries and an increasing awareness of human impact upon the environment. The rationale to re-visualize this relationship arose through understanding that ‘landscape’ is part of a psychophysical process, and the material by-product, evinced in landscape painting, is representative of a way of conceiving the environment that encourages a detached subject/object conception. A deeper understanding of how this crucial relationship has

evolved, and how foundational developments in philosophy and aesthetics have influenced the representation of the environment in Western art, is therefore essential to this process of understanding, analyzing and ultimately producing new aesthetic formulations. These concerns are explored in Chapter Two, initially looking broadly at some of the fundamental concepts in Western culture that underpin the way the environment is considered, and some of the chief components of the body/mind, nature/culture dialectic. Whilst this MFA thesis is not the place for a comprehensive study of the evolution and history of this complex area, the work of two philosophers – René Descartes and Maurice Merleau-Ponty – are investigated in some depth for their significant contributions to the debate. The more recent work of Michel Serres is also examined for his recognition of contemporary changes in the human/non-human relationship, and significantly for his undertaking to re-conceptualize this relationship as one between two entities within the biospheric complex that makes life possible on Earth.

The research explores how these ideas relate to the tradition of landscape painting in Western art, looking particularly at the aesthetic evolution of the *picturesque* and the *sublime* in Sections 2.9 and 2.10, movements that paved the way for a new immersive mode of perceiving and representing the environment. Contemporary artists have continued this investigation, and sought new ways to visualize their relationship with the environment. Practitioners such as Richard Long and Janet Cardiff have explored ways in which the artist and/or the viewer/participant can be immersed in the environment rather than simply being spectators (see Section 2.11). Permeability, and the way the body can be merged with the natural environment or be re-presented as intertwined forms, is examined in Sections 2.12 – 2.18, including discussion of the work of Ana Mendieta, Juul Kraijer and Berlinde De Bruyckere. The work of Olafur Eliasson and Charlotte Davies is specifically examined in Sections 2.15 and 2.16 in relation to the way in which our *perceptions* of separation from the environment can be challenged. The significant contributions of all of these artists in formulating new conceptions of landscape and environment is also helpful in defining the specific area of research undertaken here – not only to find a new way to experience the environment or present the body in relation to the environment, but also to represent the relationship between them as essentially and inextricably interconnected.

Chapter 3 describes in detail the methodologies used in the practice-based research. It includes a brief background on the work that preceded the current research, and how the need for further research was instigated by the identification of a sense of separation that exists in traditional landscape aesthetics. It then details the three experimental works at the heart of this research, *Lachrymal Lake*, *Heartland* and *Biopsies*. These explore the intra-active boundaries between the figure and landscape by visually immersing the viewer in an ambiguous space that is both human and non-human. Such a space allows the viewer to visually experience the intra-active connection between the two spaces, the world of the human and the world of the natural, in a singular image, as they mutually define each other. This space is depicted in the *Lachrymal Lake* series as a double space, at once anatomical and atmospheric, the two defining each other. In *Heartland* it is treated as a scaled double space, amalgamating views of human organs and landforms and in doing so defining each other. In *Biopsies* the double space is transformed into a space that integrates the two, creating a singular terrain that functions via their intra-activity.

Chapter 2 – CONTEXT

Things do not precede their interaction, rather, 'objects' emerge through particular intra-actions.

Karen Barad.⁴

This chapter examines some of the main streams of philosophy and art that underpin the way the human and the landscape are represented in Western art. Whilst an in depth analysis of this complex area of philosophy and history is beyond the scope of this research, some key factors are investigated for their particular relevance to how the human/natural relationship has evolved, and how this relationship has been developed in art. The investigation will begin with a broad overview of how the idea of landscape arose, and how human detachment from it was promoted by deeply held conceptions about the mind and the sacred, as opposed to the body and the profane. The discussion will examine some divergent philosophical positions that elucidate the issue of human detachment from the environment. Selected artists will be examined whose work reflects conventional pictorial views where the landscape is treated as a backdrop for the central human drama that takes place in front of it, much in the same way as a scenic backdrop is used in theatre. Finally, the work of various artists in the field will be investigated for their contribution to the deconstruction of this conventional pictorial view.

2.1 Bodies, landscape and culture

In every perception of nature there is actually present the whole of society.

Theodor Adorno.⁵

In a broad sense, how a culture represents its environment can be seen as evidence of its relationship to it.⁶ This can be said for all cultures, whether their relationship to the environment is expressed as graphic patterns inscribed on bark cloth, cave paintings, or ink brushed on rice paper. The fact that 'landscape', as defined by Western pictorial conventions, evolved at all as a genre in response to the environment is significant in itself, as it typifies the estrangement of the natural world from the human, such that the natural becomes objectified for human observation. Despite being a relatively recent phenomenon, anthropologically speaking, it has become so deeply ingrained as to become a 'natural' way of seeing in our culture.⁷

Questions of how this notion of landscape developed, and the philosophical foundations that underpin it, are central to this research. Etymologically, landscape refers to the shape of the land, both its natural or pre-existing form and its shaping through cultural process. This involves both the way the land is physically marked by human activity but also the way the land is represented and given meaning culturally. The concept of what defines a 'landscape' – a framed view of a tract of predominantly 'natural' land that does not contain the viewer – has permeated how we perceive

⁴ Barad, K 2003, 'Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter', *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, vol. 28, no. 3, The University of Chicago.

⁵ Cited in Macauley, D (ed.) 1996, *Minding Nature*, The Guildford Press, New York, p.3.

⁶ See Andrews, M 1999, *Landscape and Western Art*, Oxford University Press, New York.

⁷ See Abram, D 1996, *The Spell of the Sensuous*, Vintage Books, New York.

our relationship with the environment. It reflects an underlying philosophical position of a subject (the human viewer) that is distinct and separate from the object (the non-human landscape).⁸

The history of this paradigm is complex, and this is not the place to provide an adequate analysis of its evolution. However, it is important to recognise that Western philosophy, founded on Ancient Greek and Christian worldviews, upheld the idea of a divine world beyond the realm of the earth. Post-nomadic ways of life fostered notions of division and distance from land that was controlled and surveyed for arability and ownership. Human dominion over the earth was sanctioned in the Christian era by religious leaders such as Saint Augustine in the 5th century, whose philosophy advocated that the natural world was God's offering to man for control and utility. To Saint Augustine the soul and the body were metaphysically distinct; to be a human is to be a composite of soul and body, where the soul is superior to the body. The concept is grounded in a hierarchical classification of things: those things that merely exist; those things that exist and live; and those things that exist, live, and have intelligence or reason. It further developed a pre-existing Ancient Greek distrust of the earth-bound human body, and promoted a sense of abstract disconnectedness from nature [see Figure 1, for Vittore Carpaccio's Renaissance rendition of St Augustine].



1. Vittore Carpaccio, *St Augustine in his Study* (1502), tempera on panel, 141 x 210 cm, Scuola di San Giorgio degli Schiavoni, Venice.

Thus the idea of the 'rational soul' initiated in Ancient Greece, set humanity at the summit of a hierarchy of living forms. By virtue of its affinity with an eternal or divine dimension outside the bodily world, it set humanity radically apart from, or above, all other forms of life.⁹ This view was reinforced by the Christian notion of a soul superior to the body. Any vestige of an ancient view "*of an organic cosmos with a living...earth at its centre was replaced by a mechanistic perspective in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in which nature was depicted as unformed, inert matter to be controlled....*"¹⁰

Descartes extended this as a dichotomy between mechanical, unthinking matter (including all minerals, plants, and animals, as well as the human body) and pure, thinking mind (the exclusive province of the human mind and God).¹¹ The framework of Cartesian dualism helped formalise these hierarchies and dichotomies, both philosophically and empirically, and encouraged the division between subject/object, and divided the self from the natural world by positioning it as just one more, albeit superior, object within an empty geometric space.

⁸ Interview with Karen Barad in: Dolphijn and Ven der Tuin (ed.s), 2012, *New Materialism: Interviews and Cartographies*, Open Humanities Press, MPublishing, University of Michigan Library, Michigan.

⁹ Abram (1996, p. 47).

¹⁰ Macauley (1996, p.16).

¹¹ Abram (1996).

This division effectively severed the head from the body, and the human from the natural. It gave scientific licence to precepts predicated on the idea that humanity is the only mortal creature with the unique ability to think and feel, and all other creatures and material things may therefore be effectively exploited for the sake of superior human benefit.

Nature was seen as the robust other, the abundant provider of all human needs that is to be tamed and cultivated. However since the advent of climate change, our relationship to it has changed. Nature and the earth are no longer seen as an unlimited resource that can sustain the unrelenting needs of its human populace, or withstand the effects of its development.

The early 21st century has sharpened our sense of the fragility of the eco-system; “we now experience it to be a fragile, anorexic dependent, to be protected and ‘managed’.”¹² These anxieties, according to Malcolm Andrews, burden the artist in their negotiation of the dialectic between civilization and the natural world, the culture and the landscape.

These concerns are contemporaneously inextricable from any genuine attempt to represent the human/natural relationship. The anxieties that Andrews refers to are broadly and deeply felt, but easily overwhelmed by the diversions provided by a consumerist culture. One of the challenges presented to artists today is to find ways to communicate this awareness, and hopefully play some part in re-connecting the mind to the body, nature to culture, in a way that is relevant and tangible. As David Abram states: “Often it takes a slightly unusual circumstance to disturb our metaphysical distance from the corporeal world.”¹³

Understanding how the philosophical model of nature as separate from the body evolved may provide some clue of how the inverse may be visualised – how the corporeal and the environmental can be represented as not distinct from each other, but instead intra-active and mutually determining.

Since Descartes’ influential views, there have been many philosophical challenges to his oppositional logic. Thinkers such as Merleau-Ponty in the mid 20th Century foreshadowed the development of ecological philosophy that has gained more traction as the effects of the *human vs. nature* opposition have wrought such obvious damage. In Merleau-Ponty’s final work *The Visible and the Invisible*, the term ‘flesh’ is used to signify not just the flesh of our bodies, but also the flesh of the world. Using this concept, Merleau-Ponty alludes to an elemental matrix that underlies and gives rise to both the perceiver and the perceived as interdependent aspects of the one spontaneous life giving activity. It acknowledges the *reciprocal presence* of the sentient within the sensible, and vice versa.

This concept is radical in that it proposes an aesthetic approach to the environment, based on reciprocity, challenging the dissociated view that traditional landscape and Cartesian logic portrays. It does this by reducing the perceived distance between the body (the viewer) and the environment (the viewed) until the separation no longer exists. It imbricates the two. It is within this closure of distance that a new space emerges – a metaphorical landscape or ‘biospheric zone’ – where new ideas about our relationship with the natural can be aesthetically explored.

¹² Andrews, M 1999, *Landscape and Western Art*, Oxford University Press, New York, p.213

¹³ Abram (1996, p.86).

2.2 Separate entities: the gap between body and landscape

The visual arts have a long history of engagement with the representation of the body in the landscape. From 16th century paintings such as *La Tempesta* (Giorgione, 1506) [Figure 2] through to 21st century installations such as *Cloudscape* (Transsolar and Tetsuo Kundo, 2010)¹⁴ [Figure 3], artists have effectively evoked the interplay between the two, often engaging with the science of anatomy and geology. But just as science has objectified the body and the environment as purely ‘natural’ phenomena, so the visual arts have traditionally depicted the body and the landscape as segregated objects. Observed as separate entities, their relationship has been represented as a mechanical co-existence, rather than a dynamic, inter-related *experience*. In the West, it was not until Goya and Turner in the 19th Century began to explore the possibilities of visualising the sensation of the body in *relation* to the forces of nature that this paradigm began to be reformulated.



2. Giorgione, *La Tempesta* (c.1506) oil on canvas, 83 cm x 73 cm, Gallerie dell'Accademia, Venice.

The framework of dualism – of maintaining rigid boundaries between subject/object, body/landscape – has nevertheless remained the dominant paradigm. Moreover, the increasingly pervasive influence of ‘media’ in the form of digital technologies in our everyday lives, further mediates our experience, and the tangible connection with our real and present surrounds seems to be more remote than ever. There exists here an interesting parallel with Hannah Arendt’s notion of ‘earth alienation’¹⁵, namely that the expansion of known geographic and physical space brings about a closing in process that shrinks and abolishes distance. Similarly, but conversely, with the ever decreasing distance between ourselves and the knowledge we have of the world, with the world ‘at our finger-tips’, the further away we are from perceiving it in actuality.

The corporeal annexure of the body from the place it occupies, may explain in part how we have been able to regard the natural environment as resource for our



3. Transsolar and Tetsuo Kundo Architects, the making of *Cloudscape* (2010), installation in Arsenale, at the 12th international architecture biennale in Venice.

¹⁴ Transsolar & Tetsuo Kondo Architects created *Cloudscape* at the 2010 Venice Biennale where visitors can experience a cloud from below, within, and above. The structure consisted of a 4.3 metre high ramp that allows visitors to sit above the cloud. The cloud is based on the physical phenomenon of saturated air, condensation droplets floating in the space and condensation seeds.

¹⁵ Macauley, D 1996, ‘Hannah Arendt and the Politics of Place: From Earth Alienation to Oikos’ in Macauley, D (ed.) 1996, *Minding Nature*, The Guildford Press, New York, pp.102-133.

taking, an object for our manipulation, with little comprehension of the damage sustained. There is a direct corollary here with the “*exaltation of divine human existent over and above the ‘mute’ and ‘chaotic’ world of nature.*”¹⁶

In the light of current climate science re-conceptualisations and the imperative to comprehend human induced changes on both the corporeal and terrestrial environments, contemporary philosophers such as Serres and Abram have drawn attention to the inadequacy of representing the corporeal and natural environment as segregated entities.¹⁷ They have called for the creative arts to better elaborate the dynamic relationship between the human and natural environments as interconnected entities. At the same time, new developments in art are fundamentally changing the way we depict the two, focusing on ways of immersing the viewer in the experience of them as environments rather than simply representing them as discrete spatial objects.

To date, however, there has been limited aesthetic research into the question of how new approaches can provide a meaningful engagement with the inter-relationship between human and natural corporealities. Contemporary aesthetic depictions, using extant genres and methods, powerfully represent the interrelationship between the human body and landscape from an anthropocentric point of view, following the visual art tradition of depicting the landscape as a *spectacle*, and the body as separated from this spectacle, as already noted in the work of *Cloudscapes* (Transsolar and Tetsuo Kundo, 2010).

The pioneering work of environmental artists from the late 1960s onward achieved much in challenging and re-formulating this relationship between artist and landscape, gallery and environment, and has had a profound effect upon how ‘landscape’ is viewed. Overall however these interventions and installations still provide a one-way action – human marks on or within the environment. The artists may be immersed within the environment but the relationship is still largely defined by how the artist acts upon it – excavating, marking, removing, etc.

The MFA research, in contrast, is focussed on how innovative depictions of the landscape/environment can assist in expanding the capacity of existing approaches to respond to current ecological thought regarding this interrelationship. By giving form to alternative perspectives that are process driven experiences, and that attempt to visualize the human/natural intra-action, the tendency to view the environment as separate from the individual may be in some way reversed. This may be achieved through actual immersion, in three dimensional environments, like those of Eliasson, or in virtual reality constructs, as seen in the work of Davies, or may be achieved through more traditional media, such as photography, paint or sculpture like those of Rist, Kraijer and De Bruyckere. Though the work of these artists is stylistically diverse, commonality exists in the disruption of pre-set modes of perceiving the environment as something static and existing separately from the body.

J.M.W. Turner may perhaps be seen as the pioneer of this investigation, where he steadily immersed himself deeper and deeper into the experience of *being* in the landscape he was painting in order

¹⁶ Abram, D (1996, p.92).

¹⁷ See also Latour, B 2004, *Politics of Nature*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge and Morton, T 2007, *Ecology Without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge.

that he might be able to paint the *experience* of it, and not just a view of it. Famously, being bound to a mast of a ship in the midst of a snowstorm demonstrates the intensity of his conviction to be *within* the subject of his work. It could be argued that his increasing immersion *en plein air* is evidenced in the concomitant blurring, merging, and dissolution of any human subject matter within his painting [Figure 12]. For further discussion on Turner's contribution to the changing conception of the human relationship with nature see Section 2.11.

In the case of a contemporary artist like Eliasson, this sense of being within the environment is achieved through the overt use of devices and constructed environments. These are used to awaken in the viewer/participant an awareness of the inextricability of their own physiology in what they perceive – that object and subject are not separated but entwined. Davies uses an entirely virtual environment, but embeds the body within this environment through the use of breath and proprioception, and then invites the participant on a journey of their own making through environments that meld internal body with the exterior environment, such that the two become merged or blurred. Interestingly, it was Davies' own ocular experience of extreme myopia – where objects blurred and merged with their surrounds – that triggered her interest in the interconnections between the viewer and the viewed.¹⁸

The common ground in the work of these artists is the exploration of a dynamic self that is part of and reactive to the environment that it inhabits, as opposed to a passive and detached viewer observing a static external world. In order to apprehend the relevance of this motive in contemporary art, and in my own research, it is necessary to investigate some key points in the development of this division between the human viewer and the viewed environment. The following sections will look in more detail at some of the significant conditions that have underpinned the visual and conceptual disconnection between the two. This will include an overview of influential art works and philosophical developments that are fundamental to a world-view predicated on the split between human and natural, and those that seek to address it.

2.3 Thinking of nature

*A 'landscape', cultivated or wild, is already an artifice before it has become the subject of a work of art. Even when we simply look we are already shaping and interpreting... Whether or not we are artists, we have been making this kind of mental conversion for centuries. The habit is part of the whole history of our relationship with the physical environment, and the visual tradition of landscape representation has been one vital element in that relationship.*¹⁹

As noted by Andrews in this extract, representations of earth, nature and the environment, tell us as much about ourselves as the non-human world around us. This fundamental relationship (of looking/shaping) is central to understanding what it is that we *actually* see, or sense, when we perceive the environment around us. It also follows that if our perception of the landscape and our body is culturally induced, how we represent that environment is not only evidence of this enculturation, but crucial to its continuing evolution.

¹⁸ Malloy, J (ed.) 2003, *Women, Art and Technology*, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA and London England, p. 322.

¹⁹ Andrews (1999, p.1).

In this sense, ‘landscape’ is far more than the genre it typically describes – a framed expanse of an essentially natural view, with foreground, middle and background features, and seen distinctively from the point of view of a standing human²⁰. As Andrews notes the last 500 years of landscape painting in the West can be seen as an “*elegiac record of humanity’s alienation from it’s original habitat*”²¹.

The pictorial conventions evidenced in landscape art have become perceptual habits that underpin the way we *experience* the environment. The imperceptibility of this continual conversion of the environment that surrounds us into ‘landscape’ is critical to the understanding of our place in the world, and our bodies within it. Habitually regarding the body as separate from the habitat it occupies has affected the way we impact upon the environment, which in turn affects our bodies. A comprehension of the philosophical implications of this inter-relationship is vital to our contemporary understanding of humanity’s effect on nature, and vice versa.

In other words, landscape is not simply a picture of the land. As W.J.T. Mitchell states:

*Landscape is not a genre of art but a medium...Landscape is a medium of exchange between the human and the natural, the self and the other.... Landscape is a natural scene mediated by culture. It is both represented and presented space, both a signifier and a signified, both a frame and what a frame contains, both a real place and its simulacrum, both a package and the commodity inside the package.*²²

If we accept, therefore, that ‘landscape’ is not delimited to a canon of Western Art, but rather a way of seeing that permeates our global culture, it becomes apparent just how far-reaching this way of seeing is. Andrews refers to the arguments of geographer Denis Cosgrove of *landscape* as a ‘way of seeing’ determined by specific historical, cultural forces. He associates the evolution of the concept of landscape with early modern capitalism and the relinquishing of feudal systems of land tenure. According to this argument, those for whom land is the fabric of their lives, for whom it is livelihood and home environment, do not see that land as landscape. They relate to the land as ‘insiders’:

*For the insider there is no clear separation of the self from scene, subject from object. There is, rather, a fused, unsophisticated and social meaning embodied in the milieu. The insider does not enjoy the privilege of being able to walk away from the scene as we can walk away from a framed picture or from a tourist viewpoint.*²³

Leaving aside the term ‘unsophisticated’, the proposition is nevertheless germane. There is a corollary between the distinction of ‘self and nature’ and ‘self and scene’. In other words: the depiction of nature as a scene is evidence of our separation from it, our ‘outsider-ness’.

²⁰ Schama, M 1996, *Landscape and Memory*, Fontana Press, London, for more elaborate discussions of these ideas.

²¹ Andrews (1999, p.22).

²² Mitchell, WJT 1994, ‘Imperial Landscape’, in Mitchell WJT (ed.) 1994, *Landscape and Power*, University of Chicago Press, p.5.

²³ Cosgrove, D as cited in Andrews (1999, p.20).

2.4 Insiders and outsiders – no turning back?

*Once convention has been recognized as convention, you cannot go home again, for the essential condition of someone truly “close to nature” is that one does not know one is close to nature. The paradox had dogged us ever since.*²⁴

The concept of landscape is not just a pictorialisation of the world, but shapes the way we view it, and has in a sense conceptually cast us out. As Cosgrove points out, we are now ‘outsiders’. Given this proposition that we live conceptually divided from our surrounds, a pertinent question to ask is whether it is possible to go back? The immediate answer would seem to be that it is not possible – once we have become conscious that we are distinct from the environment we inhabit, it would seem impossible to unlearn that crucial step in our consciousness.

However, in cultures other than ours, the distinction between the world and ourselves is clearly recognised, but rather than accepted as ‘right’ or inevitable, ways are sought to overcome the separation. In the earliest Sanskrit texts of Ancient India, it was believed that distinctions alienated us from the wholeness of being. As a consequence, they adopted the concept of non-dualism (*advaita*), and deemed *atman* the highest form of knowledge where the subject and object coincide. Similarly, the seeking of oneness, or non-attachment in Buddhism²⁵ is a philosophical counterpoint to duality: the state of non-duality is sought to annul the fear that the self is an illusory and impermanent state.²⁶ Non-duality in these cultures is a recognized state of the highest spiritual order and actively sought as a sensation and a sustained state of being.

The dissolution of the self, or state of non-duality, is not a state actively sought, or even recognized in traditional Western thought, and therefore is not part of the ontological vocabulary of how we can exist in the world. “*To see a landscape as it is when I’m not there*”²⁷, as Simone Weil proposes, such that the perceiving of it is done by an ‘absent’ self, defies the logic of the Cartesian paradigm: I am a subject viewing an object; how can that object be viewed if ‘I’ am not there? The absence of such a concept is relevant insofar as it relates to how we regard ourselves in the world and how we can speak about and represent nature.

What is clarified by these distinctions is that ‘outsiderness’ is perhaps an inescapable phenomenon for us, but not a universal one. As David Loy points out, “*the significance we have come to place upon the duality between phusis and nomos is distinctively Western, because almost uniquely Greek in origin.*”²⁸ In his discussion of the conceptual tensions between nature and convention – Loy presents the conundrum of speaking about nature without speaking with or by convention:

This is a bifurcation which has taken and continues to take many forms, but which may be traced back to the Greek distinction between phusis and nomos, nature and convention. Was this conceptual antinomy a liberating discovery, because it deprived social and ideological structures of their necessary and ‘natural’ character, or was it

²⁴ Loy, D 1995, ‘On the Duality of Culture and Nature’, *Philosophica*, vol. 55, pp. 9-35.

²⁵ Some forms of Buddhism proposed a dualistic vision, in which the present world of suffering was compensated by the paradise of *Amida Buddha* beyond. Others, like the non-dualistic Zen vision of the Muromachi era in Japan, in which sacred and profane, matter and spirit, Buddha and ordinary mortal are seen as a single whole, seek a state of oneness and enlightenment which is thought to be achievable in the present.

²⁶ Loy (1995).

²⁷ Dean, T & Miller, D 2005, *Place*, Thames and Hudson, London.

²⁸ Loy (1995, p.11).

a thought-construction that we find ourselves constrained by? Or both? Such questions reveal how inescapable dualism has become for us: even the attempt to understand it becomes expressed in terms of it.

Much of Western tradition can be understood in terms of increasing self-consciousness about the difference between nature and convention/culture, and the dialectic whereby each alternately becomes preferred to the other.²⁹

The way in which contemporary global culture views the environment and how this differs from the way, for instance, pre-modern cultures view it, is a complex epistemological and ontological area, beyond the scope of this MFA thesis. However, for the purposes of this research, the broad parameters proposed by Loy are accepted in identifying a seminal dualistic concept in Western thought that has influenced the way the nature is considered as separate from the human world.

The correlative visual paradigm – to portray the world as a detached observer – has informed, and continues to affect, the way we think about our relationship to our habitat. This detachment received its most profound and influential formulation in Descartes in the 17th century.

2.5 René Descartes: the human subject and the all seeing ‘I’

Descartes believed that studying the process of thinking could erase uncertainty about physical existence. This resulted in his famous aphorism “cogito ergo sum” – “I think, therefore I am”.³⁰

According to Descartes, for the subject to see it must be certain that it is.³¹ It can only achieve this certainty by eliminating the external world in order to find in itself the foundation of its own existence. To attain this certainty Descartes subjects the empirical sensations of his own body to sceptical analysis. What he is seeking is the equivalent of ‘the one fixed and immovable point’ for subjectivity as used by Archimedes in his mathematical calculations. This fixed point is only certain inasmuch as it is conscious of itself:

At this point I come to the fact that there is consciousness (or experience: cogitatio); of this and this only I cannot be deprived. I am, I exist: that is certain. For how long? For as long as I am experiencing (cogito), maybe, if I wholly ceased from experiencing (ab omni cogitatione), I should at once wholly cease to be.³²

Via this reductive reasoning, the only absolute certainty remaining is the subject’s self-consciousness. To establish this it must first define itself as a clear and distinct idea from everything which is unclear and indistinct. To do this it must move out of the ‘deep sea’ of sensory extensions - extensions which are not connected to its true identity - leaving only self-consciousness. Finally, having ascertained what is unrelated to itself, this self-consciousness is able to clearly define itself.

²⁹ Loy (1995, p.1).

³⁰ Descartes, R 1641 ‘Second Meditation’, in *Descartes: Philosophical Writings*, Anscombe, E & Geach, PT (trans.), 1970 Thomas Nelson, Melbourne.

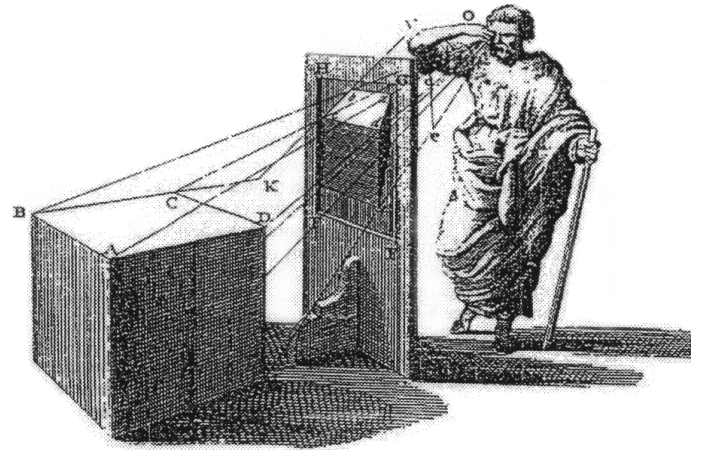
³¹ See Grosz, E 1994, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism*, Indiana University Press, Indiana.

³² Descartes (1970, p. 69).

To demonstrate the difference between the mathematical truth of seeing and the mere sensory nature of experience, Descartes examines the ‘sight’ of a blind man using two walking sticks. The sense perceptions carrying the information to the blind man are in the first instance sensations of touch. They are only interpreted once they reach the blind man's soul, seated in his brain, where sensations are converted into ideas:

*The act of consciousness (action de la pensee) involved is a simple act of imagination; but it contains implicitly a reckoning like that made by surveyors, who measure inaccessible places by means of two different observation posts.*³³

Descartes’ rejection of the existence of anything unless it was measureable and able to be processed by the human consciousness, (according to the reductive “cogito ergo sum”, that could be the only true standard of reckoning with the world) supported the existing “ocular epistemology”³⁴ prevalent in European philosophy and artistic codes of practice at the time. Alberti and his predecessor, Brunelleschi, had established through the development of perspectivalism in the fifteenth century, a system of understanding and recording the world via Euclidian mathematical principles that placed the artist/viewer at the apex of a “cone of vision”. As Amelia Jones states, the placement of the artist’s eye in this privileged position “epitomizes the centred individual of early modern European culture”³⁵ and establishes the notion of seeing being synonymous with knowledge.



4. Sketch from Leone Battista Alberti's *De pictura* (About painting) published in 1436.

The confluence of these beliefs and scientific developments – rationalism and geometry – with Descartes’ highly influential modes of deduction, embedded the “ideological force of perspectival logic that underlies the conception of representation and, correlatively, the construction of the “subject as a coherent individual ‘outside’ the world and picture.”³⁶ All of these influences contributed to an increasing distrust of earthbound experiences, the reduction of all that is non-human to numerical formulas and ‘truths’, and a geometry that was no longer geocentric.³⁷

The predominance of single point perspectival sight – a pre-modern mathematically based visuality – has thus been instrumental in the evolution of the conventional landscape view. This has been at the expense of the other notions of sight as ‘immersive’, of being enveloped inside what we see as a participant.

³³ Descartes (1970, p. 248-50).

³⁴ Jay, M 1994, *Downcast Eyes: the denigration of vision in the twentieth century*, University of California Press, Berkeley & Los Angeles, California, for further discussion.

³⁵ Jones, A 2006, *Self/Image: technology, representation, and the contemporary subject*, Routledge, New York, p.5.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p.7.

³⁷ Macauley (1996, p.105).

As Madeleine Grynsztejn notes:

*.... The enduring illusionistic tools that art and art history have refined since the Renaissance to structure and codify the variety and appearance of the visual world: such classic principles as Albertian one-point perspective, Euclidian geometry, and Cartesian coordinate systems, all of which formalize an essentially optic (as opposed to haptic) relationship between viewer and viewed. These constructions presuppose and reflect a belief in an external world of stationary and objective truth, and also in an equally static and autonomous observing subject, imagined as a disembodied eye free from the physiological idiosyncrasies of its retinal apparatus....*³⁸

Further, as John Berger writes in *Ways of Seeing*:

*The convention of perspective, which is unique to European art and which was first established in the early Renaissance, centres everything on the eye of the beholder. It is like a beam from a lighthouse – only instead of light travelling outward, appearances travel in. The conventions called those appearances reality. Perspective makes the single eye the centre of the visible world. Everything converges on the eye as to the vanishing point of infinity. The visible world is arranged for the spectator as the universe was once thought to be arranged for God.*³⁹

In short, equating the all-seeing eye with a transcendental 'I' at the centre of the Cartesian dialectic, was fundamental in the development of the prevailing Western view that establishes the self as distinct and separate from the environment it inhabits.⁴⁰ As previously noted, it was not until the 20th century that this paradigm received its first sustained challenge by Merleau-Ponty.

2.6 Maurice Merleau-Ponty: landscape as flesh

Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of vision challenges the Cartesian paradigm and as a consequence conventional notions of figurative and landscape painting.

*The properties of the object and the intentions of the subject....are not only intermingled; they also constitute a new whole... it is impossible to say 'which started first' in the exchange of stimuli and responses.*⁴¹

Merleau-Ponty's work provides a basis for a radically new concept of visuality where there is a reciprocal intertwining of different bodies rather than vision being a mechanical act of a distant observer. It is an immersive process intrinsically involving both the viewer and viewed. Visuality in this schema is no longer merely a mechanical and mathematical optical action as Descartes conceives it. It is an incorporation of the viewer in the flesh of the world:

³⁸ Grynsztejn, M (ed.) 2007, *Take Your Time, Olafur Eliasson*, Thames and Hudson, New York, p.15.

³⁹ Berger, J 1972, *Ways of Seeing*, Penguin Books, London, p.16.

⁴⁰ It should be noted here that this hypothesis is contradicted by some theoreticians, such as Erwin Panofsky, who have described this perspectival effect as immersive, referring to the ability of a pictorial picture plane through its illusionistic qualities to optically envelope the viewer's experience in a deep space where the physical distance between viewer and painterly surface is dissolved. For further reference see Panofsky, E 1991, *Perspective as Symbolic Form*, Wood, C (trans.), Zone Books, MIT Press, Massachusetts.

⁴¹ Merleau-Ponty, M 1964, *The Phenomenology of Perception*, cited in Varela, F, Thompson, E, Rosch, E 1991, *The Embodied Mind: cognitive science and human experience*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, p.174.

*Visible and mobile, my body is a thing among things; it is caught in the fabric of the world, and its cohesion is that of a thing. But because it moves itself and sees, it holds things in a circle around itself. Things are an annex or prolongation of itself; they are encrusted into its flesh, they are part of its full definition; the world is made of the same stuff as the body. This way of turning things around, these antinomies, are different ways of saying that vision happens among, or is caught in things - in that place where something visible undertakes to see, becomes visible for itself by virtue of the sight of things; in that place where there persists, like the mother water in crystal, **the undividedness of the sensing and the sensed.***⁴² (My emphasis)

Descartes' abstract division between the intelligible and sensible is contravened by this biological acknowledgement of the "undividedness of the sensing and the sensed". If the subject of vision is also its object and vice-versa, a new economy of sight is possible, in which the spectator is physically implicated in the field of vision. The spectator is no longer simply a spectator.

*[B]y disclosing the body itself as the very subject of awareness, Merleau-Ponty demolishes any hope that philosophy might eventually provide a complete picture of reality (for any such total account of 'what is' requires a mind or consciousness that stands somehow outside of existence, whether to compile the account or, finally, to receive and comprehend it). Yet by this same move he opens, at last, the possibility of a truly authentic phenomenology, a philosophy which would strive, not to explain the world as if from outside, but to give voice to the world from within it, recalling us to our participation in the here-and-now...*⁴³

Merleau-Ponty thus differentiates this biological conceptualisation of vision from Descartes' mathematical theory that denies consciousness as embedded in the body. According to Descartes, the mind, as the true self, is outside both the world and the body. What assures Descartes of the truth of himself is that he has a clear and distinct perception of it, as an abstract concept similar to a mathematical axiom. His perception of his senses and his body are clear, but not distinct from the sensation he has of them. Sensation and consciousness are thus metaphysically opposed.

For Merleau-Ponty, on the contrary, sensation and the consciousness of sensation are inextricable from one another. This is illustrated by the "double sensation" of two hands touching, of feeling and being felt. There is a *chiasm*⁴⁴ between the sensation of feeling by the subject and the being felt by the object, which acts as a reversible phenomenon of the being touched by the touching and vice versa. In this relationship each hand is in the reciprocal position of subject and object, of "perceiving" and "being perceived." Distinct from the Cartesian concept of consciousness being a clear and distinct *idea*, held in tact by a vigorous though tenuous process of analysis and doubt, it is an experience of the self embedded within the world. There can be no access to this self except by

⁴² Merleau-Ponty, M 1964, 'Eye and Mind', *The Primacy of Perception*, Wild, J (ed.), Eadie, J M (trans.) Northwestern University Press, Evanston, p. 163.

⁴³ Abram (1997, p. 47).

⁴⁴ The chiasm is an image Merleau-Ponty used to describe our embodied subjectivity as something that is never located purely in either our tangibility or in our touching, but in the intertwining of these two aspects. It describes how this overlapping and encroachment can take place between two things that nevertheless retain a divergence, in that touching and touched are obviously never exactly the same thing.

means of the body and its senses in conjunction with the world it is immersed within. This suggests a shift from a mathematically framed understanding of the human to one that is grounded in biology and neurology. The mind and perception are no longer abstract entities but biological entities existing in a network of other entities – a habitat.

Sight is similarly defined in relation to the world: whereby the seer and the seen are inextricably linked:

*Vision is not a certain mode of thought or presence to self: it is the means given me for being absent from myself, for being present at the fission of Being from the inside - the fission at whose termination, and not before, I come back to myself.*⁴⁵

This idea of reciprocal presence and absence is distinct from Descartes' process of reductive logic, whereby the self is only and finally determined by eliminating everything that is deemed not of the self, and all that is left is the irreducible 'I'. In Merleau-Ponty's view, absence and presence are ontologically indistinguishable: they belong simultaneously to a process whereby the senses of the body and mind are corporeally intertwined.

Merleau-Ponty introduced the concept of 'flesh' in *The Visible and the Invisible*, to elucidate the relationship between the body, the subject and world. Interleaving is one of several metaphors that he devised to explain the intertwined nature of this relationship. Merleau-Ponty writes of an overlapping of "the leaves of my body and the leaves of the visible world... It is between these intercalated leaves that there is visibility."⁴⁶ Within this schema, where visibility is a form of tangibility, the separation between the body and the world is nullified: they are one 'flesh.' It literally incorporates body, consciousness and the surrounding world into a single inter-modulated space.

What this concept of flesh offers is a radical revaluation of how we think of the relationship between the human body and the body of the landscape. Merleau-Ponty proposes a model of mutuality based on corporeal imbrication. In essence, it proposes a concept where the two are mutually connected and determined by their common ground, the biosphere. Merleau-Ponty in his major work *Phenomenology of Perception*, extended the aims of phenomenological philosophy beyond the "description of things as they appear to the experiencing consciousness" to reveal the connection between human intellect and bodily perception. "Transcendence, no longer a special property of the abstract intellect, becomes in his Phenomenology a capacity of the physiological body itself... By thus shifting the prime focus from the human intellect to what he called the 'body-subject' or the 'lived body,' Merleau-Ponty uncovered the radical extent to which all subjectivity, or awareness, presupposes our inherence in a sensuous, corporeal world."⁴⁷

This shift marks an important disjuncture with the Cartesian dichotomy of mind/body, and indeed with the notion central to the Western philosophical tradition, where a 'rational soul' is linked with a divine dimension outside of the body and beyond the corporeal world.⁴⁸ This principle of divine association, and a hierarchy of all living matter with humanity in the penultimate position below

⁴⁵ Merleau-Ponty (1964, p. 186).

⁴⁶ Merleau-Ponty, M 1968, 'Intertwining – The Chiasm', *The Visible and the Invisible*, Wild, J (ed.) Lingis, A (trans.), Northwestern University Press, Evanston, p. 139.

⁴⁷ Abram D 1988, 'Merleau-Ponty and the Voice of the Earth', in Macauley D (ed.) 1996, *Minding Nature*, The Guildford Press, New York, p. 84.

⁴⁸ Abram (1996, p. 47).

only God ‘himself’ has been pivotal in the justification of human dominion over the planet and in the exploitation and manipulation of all non-human forms that inhabit it.

Our civilised distrust of the senses and of the body engenders a metaphysical detachment from the sensible world – it fosters the illusion that we ourselves are not part of the world that we study, that we can objectively stand apart from that world, as spectators, and can thus determine its workings from outside. A renewed attentiveness to bodily experience, however, enables us to recognize and affirm our inevitable involvement in that which we observe, our corporeal immersion in the depth of a breathing Body much larger than our own.⁴⁹

If this is indeed the foundation of human exploitation, then it would not seem possible to dislodge such deeply ingrained beliefs without presenting a new mode of experience where the perceiver is no longer outside of the ‘experience’, but is instead in the midst of it.

The Merleau-Pontian sense of the Earth names a more diverse phenomenon, at once both visible and invisible, incorporating both the deep ground that supports our bodies and the fluid atmosphere in which we breathe. In discovering the body, or in discovering a new way of thinking the body and finally experiencing the body, Merleau-Ponty was also disclosing a new way of perceiving the Earth of which the body is a part. To assert, as he did throughout the course of his life, that the human intellect is a recapitulation or prolongation of a transcendence already underway at the most immediate level of bodily sensation – to assert that the ‘mind’ or the ‘soul’ has a carnal genesis – is to suggest, by a strange analogy of elements that stretches back to the very beginnings of philosophy, that the sky is part of the Earth, to imply that the sky and the Earth need no longer be seen in opposition, that this sky, this space in which we live and breathe, is not opposed to the Earth but is a prolongation, even an organ of this planet. If the soul is not contrary to the body, then human beings are no longer suspended between a dense inert Earth and a spiritual sky, no more than they are suspended between Being and Nothingness. For the first time in modern philosophy, human beings with all their thoughts and their ideas are enveloped within the atmosphere of this planet, an atmosphere that circulates both inside and outside of their bodies.⁵⁰

Merleau-Ponty’s reformulation of the relationship between body and its habitat, or more precisely the human body as part of the natural body, forms the basis for the work of Michel Serres. Extending Merleau-Ponty’s work, Serres explores how the human body and the earthly habitat are two forms of the same matter, manifestations of a single living substance that differentiates itself in an infinite variety of forms, manifestations of the one biosphere.

⁴⁹ Abram (1988, p. 84).

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 88.

2.7 Michel Serres: biospheric space

Serres occupies a unique position in understanding the inter-relationship between the human and the non-human. As a philosopher of science, historian of civilization and writer he has undertaken extensive case studies into the inter-connection between artistic, scientific and natural history. Arguably one his most important works is *The Natural Contract* where he focuses on the work of Francisco Goya's *Duelo a garrotazos (Duel with Clubs)*, 1820-24, [Figure 5].

What he notes as exceptionally innovative in Goya's work is the way it places the human subject and the natural world in a profoundly dynamic interconnection. This inter-relationship is both perceptual (they are each locked in a deadly gaze) and visceral (they are each enmeshed in mortal contact with each other). In a single, unified image Goya, in Serres's view, has brought together the position of both Descartes and Merleau-Ponty, the conceptual world of perception with the corporeal world of touch.

Yet something has changed in this scenario:

Quicksand is swallowing the duelists; the river is threatening the fighter: earth, waters and climate, the mute world, the voiceless things once placed as a décor surrounding the usual spectacles, all those things that never interested anyone, from now on thrust themselves brutally and without warning into our schemes and maneuvers... What was once local – this river, that swamp – is now global: Planet Earth.⁵¹



5. Francisco Goya, *Duelo a garrotazos (Duel with Clubs)* (1820-1824), oil transferred to canvas from mural, 125 x 261cm, Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid.

No longer are the gigantic bodies and the macroscopic landscape two objects in an empty space. Rather Goya has placed them in conflict with each other in an explosive space where even the cloud formations echo the all too human struggle, or is it the other way round? It is not the idyllic setting of the Renaissance, the pastoral scenes of the Picturesque, the spectacular vistas of the Sublime but something radically different. Goya places the men engaged in battle in a terrain that is consuming both them and itself. Not two separate entities but two conflictual processes, that between humans and that between the human and the natural. All are entwined in a single sphere of struggle, the

⁵¹ Serres, M 1992, *The Natural Contract*, MacArthur, E & Paulson, W (trans.) 1995, University of Michigan, p. 3.

world of blood and bone, water and earth, the one sinking into the other: the biosphere. The battle is internecine: each blow seems to injure not just these bodies but like radiation the terrain that surrounds them. They sink into the earth. The landscape around them is denuded of cover and life.

Goya's depictions of the Spanish Napoleonic wars and their aftermath, including the *Black Paintings* series to which *Duel With Clubs* belongs, are significant not only as a remarkable artistic insight into the tragedy and brutality of these wars, but also because they depict the first total war of the modern era in which the enemy was no longer the enemy's army but its civilians and their natural habitats. Goya bore witness to the unilateral damage wreaked upon not just the citizens of Spain, but also the brutal attack on their land itself.⁵²

Serres is at pains to point out that Goya's work establishes a new concept where the human and non-human determine each other but do so in a way that is mutually destructive: "Global history enters nature; global nature enters history; this is something utterly new."⁵³

This violent inter-determinacy had never been aesthetically witnessed before; let alone its scale, comprising both human bodies and whole terrains. Serres argues that two sets of relationships come together and collide in this single image: the belligerent relationship between humans and their bodies and their conflicted relationship with nature. In the space of this one image, Serres argues, we are witnessing the dawn of a new era where the survival of humanity depends not simply on human co-existence but also its co-existence with nature.

*In the days of the Iliad and of Goya, the world wasn't considered fragile: on the contrary, it was threatening, and it easily triumphed over men, over those who won battles, and over wars themselves.*⁵⁴

As Gwynn A. Williams notes, Goya's depictions of the Spanish Napoleonic Wars and their impact, present a world where the human figure and the natural environment are mutilated and decimated by human activity. Humanity is at war not simply with itself but also with the natural world. As Serres formulates it, "Lakes of humanity, physical actors in the physical system of the Earth", now threaten the viability of life itself. He suggests that only a new contract can address such a profoundly antagonistic relationship. This contract would allow for recognition of two things: firstly, the intertwined nature of the human and non-human, as 'lakes of humanity'; secondly the need for a change in this intertwining such that the human no longer destroys the non-human, as to do so would be mutually destructive.

Serres calls for a new relationship, a revised contract between the human and natural world to avoid human extinction. He believes a new culture is required that brings together the world of human subjects and the world of natural objects, the domains of art and the domains of science. The *Natural Contract* itself is an exemplar of this fusion, being both a work of literature and a philosophy of science. It fuses elements of both, the study of scientific relationships (Leibniz) with a meditation on the art of relationships (Goya).

⁵² For further reading see Williams GA 1976, *Goya and the Impossible Revolution*, Pantheon Books, New York.

⁵³ Serres (1992, p. 4).

⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 11.

Underpinning this approach is what he terms a theory of the biosphere, an understanding of the way in which the human is bonded to its habitat, the human mammalian sea to its oceanic depths, the human anatomy to the atmospheric amniotic fluid that allows life to continue. In short, a theory of the what binds all the entities of the biosphere, the cords that tie the human protagonists in earthly struggle, that tie their struggle into the earth and the struggle of the earth against their blows:

*This is the source of continued meditation on cords – the visible ones... that bind mountain climbers together...the invisible ones that join lovers and families...mankind to the Earth...And suddenly we cast off all these ties: we untie them: humanity takes off. From where? How? Toward what?*⁵⁵

Critical here is Serres' concept of cords as connecting different aspects of the human and natural world. This concept operates as a driving force in my research. In tandem, with Merleau-Ponty's concept of 'flesh', the research seeks new metaphors that enable us to investigate how the human and natural worlds can be re-connected, so that we can better understand the inextricable relationship between the two. My experimental paintings began as an investigation of such connections – between tears and the sea, organs and reservoirs, human skin and the earth's terrain. In doing so they visually dramatise the reintegration of the two domains: the human subject and the natural object, the human body and its habitat. What has been previously depicted as segregated from one another in conventional landscape aesthetics is re-formulated as an integrated form. A better understanding of these pictorial traditions is required before proceeding with a detailed study of the paintings in this research that challenge these conventions.

2.8 Looking at the landscape

We no longer see nature; we see pictures.

Auguste Cezanne⁵⁶

Articulated to the diverse philosophical positions discussed in the preceding sections are artistic positions that similarly explore the interrelationship between the human and non-human fields. The conventional approach of artists and philosophers is to treat the relationship between the human corporeal and natural environments, as a static, one-way activity, where the non-human is represented as an object for human observation. As discussed previously, the concept of 'landscape' has a complex and intricate history. It is differentiated in terms of cultural value in Western and Eastern art, secondary in the former and primary in the latter until very recently. It is also distinguished by a variety of approaches modulating the interrelationship between human and natural phenomena.

It was the seminal Italian poet Petrarch, in 1336, who famously first climbed Mount Ventoux for the view. This act set the scene for the modern notion of nature as a vista or landscape, a pleasure for the beholder. Significantly on reaching the summit, and being the first documented *Alpino* or mountaineer, he pulled a copy of St Augustine's *Confessions* from his pocket to reflect on how the pleasure in viewing nature was an allegory for understanding the soul. There is a two-fold meaning in Petrarch's double act. On the one hand an understanding that the inner human world and the external

⁵⁵ Latour, B 1995, *Conversations on Science, Culture, and Time: Michel Serres Interviewed by Bruno Latour*, The University of Michigan Press, p. 88.

⁵⁶ Andrews (1999, p. 177).

natural world are inextricably connected, on the other that the natural world is simply a reflection of the human world. However, it is the latter that dominates the modern notion of landscape.

This is most clearly seen in two of the more developed tropes of landscape art in recent history, the *picturesque* and the *sublime*. The use of landscape as a scenic backdrop to the central human drama as witnessed in Renaissance painting, is gradually replaced by a desire to witness the landscape as an inspiration for aesthetic pleasure in the *picturesque*. This in turn is replaced in the Romantic period by a desire to sense the power and unpredictable power of nature in the *sublime*.

2.9 The Picturesque

The *picturesque* is an 18th century aesthetic concept introduced in 1782 by William Gilpin with his publication *Observations on the River Wye, and Several Parts of South Wales, etc. Relative Chiefly to Picturesque Beauty; made in the Summer of the Year 1770*. This was a practical book that instructed English travellers to examine “the face of a country by the rules of picturesque beauty”.⁵⁷

This aesthetic ideal applied to scenes that occupy the mid-ground between the ideal landscapes of the 17th century and the sublime landscapes of Romanticism [for example see *A View of Goodrich Castle*, Figure 6]. It conceived landscape as a place where the human figure is satiated in a nurturing natural world. The leading advocate of the picturesque, Gilpin, in his *Three Essays: on Picturesque Beauty, on Picturesque Travel and on Sketching Landscape: to which is added a poem, on Landscape Painting* (1792) defines picturesque as that which stimulates the imagination to reverie.⁵⁸

In 1802 Gilpin published his text *Essay on Prints* where he defined the picturesque as “that kind of beauty which is agreeable in a picture” and began to expound his “principles of picturesque beauty”, based largely on his knowledge of landscape painting, as a formula. There were two requisite elements: *Texture* – which should be “rough”, “intricate”, “varied”, or “broken”, without obvious straight lines; and *Composition* – which should work as a unified whole, incorporating several elements: a dark “foreground” with a “front” or “side screens”, a



6. William Gilpin, *A View of Goodrich Castle* (c.1782), etching and aquatint, from Gilpin's book, *Observations on the River Wye*.



7. Claude Lorrain, *Italian Coastal Landscape*, (1642), oil on canvas, 97 x 131 cm, Staatliche Museum, Berlin.

⁵⁷ Gilpin, W 1800, *Observations on the River Wye, and Several Parts of South Wales, etc. Relative Chiefly to Picturesque Beauty; made in the Summer of the Year 1770*, A. Strahan, for T. Cadell, Jun. and W. Davies, London, digitized reference from the Oxford University Library.

⁵⁸ Gilpin, W 1792, *Three Essays: on Picturesque Beauty, on Picturesque Travel and on Sketching Landscape: to which is added a poem, on Landscape*, digitized reference from the Research Library, Getty Research Institute.

brighter middle “distance”, and at least one further, less distinctly depicted, “distance”. A ruined abbey or castle would add “consequence”. A low viewpoint was preferable to a view from on high, as it was more in keeping with the level of the eye in an upright human.⁵⁹

During the late 1760s and 1770s Gilpin travelled extensively through various parts of Britain, and located scenes that fitted these principles, assiduously recording his thoughts and sketches in notebooks. These accounts, which were published at intervals from 1792, were enormously influential in introducing the idea of the *picturesque*. What these accounts reveal is a process whereby ‘natural views’ were chosen for the aesthetic pleasure that could be derived from them, but usually not without some artistic amendment, perhaps in the form of a carefully placed tree, to make the scene more pleasurable as a setting for human activity. Thus, nature is processed through an artistic filter to make it more palatable for human aesthetic consumption.

Claude Lorrain’s work, such as his painting *Italian Coastal Landscape* [Figure 7] was perhaps the starting point for Gilpin’s writings on the picturesque – the viewer is set at a low viewpoint looking up at the composition. The large tree in the centre has been placed there as a compositional device – an invention – in order to separate the sea and the ruins. It is an ‘ideal’ world where the human is at its centre and the natural world is calibrated as a backdrop to its activity. Landscapes from the Baroque period, such as Lorrain’s, were influenced by classical antiquity and sought to illustrate an ideal landscape recalling Arcadia, a legendary place in ancient Greece known for its quiet pastoral beauty. The Roman poet Virgil (70 BC –19 BC) described Arcadia in his *Eclogues* as the home of pastoral simplicity. In this idealized classical landscape every tree, rock, or animal was carefully placed to present a harmonious, balanced, and timeless world centred on the human.



8. Nicolas Poussin, *Landscape in Calm Weather* (1651), oil on canvas, 99 x 132 cm, Getty Centre, Los Angeles.



9. Nicolas Poussin, *Landscape with a Storm* (1651), oil on canvas, 99 x 132 cm, Musée des Beaux-arts, Rouen.

Lorrain, and French compatriot Nicolas Poussin, spent most of their careers in Rome drawing inspiration from the Roman countryside. Their sketching campaigns account, in part at least, for both artists’ ability to portray vivid and detailed landscapes. Poussin, who in his early years was famed for his historical tableaux where the landscape was used merely as a backdrop to classical or

⁵⁹ Gilpin, W 1802, *Essay on Prints*, A. Strahan, for T. Cadell, Jun. and W. Davies, London, digitized reference from the University of California, California Digital Library Research Library.

religious dramas, came later in life to use landscape as a mode capable of transmitting emotional content. Poussin's studies in the field undoubtedly contributed to his ability to show correspondences between human feelings and natural phenomena. This heralded a turning point in the history of painting whereby the status of landscape was elevated from that of scenography to being a principal subject matter for art.

This marked change in emphasis in Poussin's work was evidenced in the late 1640s and early 1650s. *Paysage par temps calme* (*Landscape in Calm Weather*) [Figure 8] painted in 1651 does not relate a story but rather evokes a human mood. The ordered composition, the clear, golden light and the stillness portrayed by the mirror-like reflection of the lake's surface evoke a sense of tranquillity. In the same year Poussin also painted a pendant to this painting, *Landscape with a Storm* [Figure 9], and together their contrasting weather effects reflect nature's changing and unpredictable relationship with man, and its ability to conjure a strong emotional reaction in the viewer. This unpredictable relationship would be further explored in the *sublime*.

2.10 The Sublime

The *sublime* continued this formal tradition but recalibrated it such that nature overwhelmed the human subject and made it vulnerable to its unpredictable force. Nature was still a setting for human activity but, continuing the course set by Poussin, it was no longer embodied as a passive and inert entity.



10. Casper David Friedrich, *The Monk by the Sea* (1808-10), oil on canvas, 110 x 172 cm, Alte Nationalgalerie, Berlin.



11. Johan Dahl, *The Outbreak of Vesuvius* (1826), oil on canvas, 128 x 172 cm, Städelsches Kunstinstitut, Frankfurt.

The *sublime* referred to an awe-inspiring, savage grandeur, a natural world un-mastered by man. In the Romantic era it was seen as evidence of the power of God – a theme that artists and poets were exploring in this period, and it mixed contradictory emotions such as pain and pleasure, terror and awe. The wilder and grander the view and the more the scale belittled the human observer, the greater the sublime effect [Figures 10 & 11]. In the eighteenth century, the British statesman and political theorist Edmund Burke defined the *sublime* in landscape as the ultimate experience of divinity born of a mixture of fear, awe, and enlightenment produced by the contemplation of a powerful, terrifying nature.⁶⁰

⁶⁰ Burke, E 1757, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the origin of our ideas on The Sublime and Beautiful*, Digireads.com.

Turner approached the *sublime* as an opportunity to re-evaluate nature on its own terms, rather than as simply an extension or embodiment of human drama. In his painting *Snow Storm - Steam-Boat off a Harbour's Mouth making Signals in Shallow Water and going by the Lead. The Author was in this Storm on the Night Ariel left Harwich* [Figure 12], Turner claims to have been bound to the mast for four hours during the storm. Indeed he goes so far as to include the claim in the inordinately long title, which seems predicated on a desire to validate the experience recorded.

Responding to the vehement criticism the painting received at the time, Turner's replied:

*I did not paint it to be understood, but I wished to show what such a scene was like: I got sailors to lash me to the mast to observe it; I was lashed for four hours, and did not expect to escape, but I felt bound to record it if I did. But no one had any business to like the picture.*⁶¹

Whether Turner actually had the experience as he claims is contestable, as Andrew's points out in *Landscape and Western Art*. However, what is significant is Turner's insistence on the authentic experience of being within nature, and to represent it as it is experienced, not in the idealized and 'corrected' terms promulgated by the neoclassical academy or as understood by painters of the picturesque. Whilst it was foreshadowed in the *plein air* studies of painters like Poussin, the concern to be immersed in the environment and for *this experience to dictate* how the image of the landscape is formulated is a new development in the history of landscape painting in the West. This more active immersion in nature and its unpredictable force changes the relationship between the artist and the natural world, and destabilizes the whole idea of landscape being a "fixed, stable arrangement of natural forms ordered by the artist at a distance – a physical distance, both in terms of a prospect viewpoint and a studio finishing."⁶²

Concurrent changes in philosophy and science in early nineteenth century Europe were entwined with these aesthetic developments. Geologists and cultural thinkers increasingly stressed that humans were not as detached from natural processes as might have been previously assumed, and vigorously encouraged artists of the time to educate themselves in geology and botany to better convey truthfulness to nature in their painting.⁶³



12. JMW Turner, *Snow Storm - Steam-Boat off a Harbour's Mouth* (1842), oil on canvas, 91.4 x 121.9 cm, Tate Gallery, London.

⁶¹ Andrews, M (1999, p. 177).

⁶² Ibid., p. 179.

⁶³ Ibid., p. 181.

John Ruskin, the leading English art critic of the Victorian era, was a strong defender of Turner's approach and advocate of this new experiential methodology. In his 1843 publication *Modern Painters* he openly disparaged the work of painters like Lorrain for their implausible landscapes created through a collage of pastoral studies, studio contrivances and artificial lighting. Speaking of Claude's *Landscape of Isaac and Rebekah* from 1648, he states:

*This is, I believe, a fair example of what is commonly called an 'ideal' landscape, i.e., a group of the artist's studies from nature, individually spoiled, selected with such opposition of character as may insure their neutralizing each other's effect, and united with sufficient unnaturalness and violence of association to insure their producing a general sensation of the impossible.*⁶⁴

Ruskin's derision of Claude's failure to communicate the Campagna landscape with any fidelity is in keeping with his view that the artist is duty bound to "insist on the necessity, as well as the dignity, of an earnest, faithful, loving study of nature as she is."⁶⁵

The artist at this time was encouraged to gain scientific knowledge of their subject matter, and close observation of natural phenomena was increasingly urged upon the landscape painter. In 1831, just prior to Turner's *Snow Storm*, Carl Gustav Carus, a German physiologist, painter and friend of Goethe, coined the term *Erdlebenbildkunst* ('depiction of earth's life') in order to identify an art of landscape that differed from traditional landscape modes. This was a mode where the 'historical' landscape was not a scene of human activity in which the natural world was relegated to the position of backdrop, but was rather a faithful depiction of the natural world and the history of the earth itself, that no longer centred on the insistent presence of the heroic human narrative.



13. Carl Rottmann, *Sikyon and Corinth* (1836), oil on canvas, 85 x 102 cm, Alte Pinakothek, Munich.

What these developments reveal is a change in the status of the landscape in painting from a relatively inert background in the Renaissance to becoming a dramatic focal subject in its own right, a site to explore the relationship between the human and the non-human. As Andrews states: "Nature's processes are being depicted in a way that substitute for the human drama, and yet continue to imply, if not incorporate, the human dimension."⁶⁶ The new emphasis on faithfulness to 'nature's truth' could be interpreted in two ways: an accurate rendering of the geological features of the environment, as advocated by Carus and seen in the work of painters such as Carl Rottmann's *Sikyon and Corinth* [Figure 13]; or what might be termed the *emotional* truth to nature. Turner's *Snow Storm* can perhaps be seen as a fusion of both, where he demonstrates his conviction to

⁶⁴ Ruskin, J as cited in Andrews, M (1999, p. 182).

⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 183.

⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 188.

authentically render the atmospheric effects of light and water on a man-made object (the ship as it is tossed about by the sea). But here his view is not a dispassionate scientific one – he also imparts some sense of the awe inspired in being so intimately involved in such an overwhelming natural process.

Whilst Turner's groundbreaking achievements were eclipsed by the hard-edged neoclassicism of contemporary painters such as Jacques-Louis David and Auguste-Dominique Ingres, he instigated a fundamental shift in the potential of landscape painting in the West to present a concept of the natural world that went beyond the merely Cartesian. He did this by establishing an approach where the integration of the human within the natural becomes the new subject matter, and immersion within the process supplants the pictorial approach that treats landscape painting as an exercise in recording the natural world from a relatively detached viewpoint.

2.11 From landscape to Land Art

What Turner initiated in the mid 19th century, along with the earlier work of Goya, was a radical recalibration of the dominant Cartesian pictorial paradigm. Nature was no longer simply the backdrop to human activity. It was now a protagonist. Whilst his work, and to a lesser extent Goya's, operate distinctly within the framework of 'landscape', and belong to a particular dialectic established in the Renaissance between 'art' and 'nature', their approach departed from portraying the human being as constituting the dramatic focus of a painting, and formulated a new paradigm where the human and the non-human are mutual protagonists in a wider drama.

The trajectory set by Turner and Goya, was so novel and radical, that its implications were not fully explored until the arrival of Land Art in the second half of the 20th century. I focus here on works that will be of interest due to their process-orientated approach to experiencing landscape, foregrounding nature as a primary focus for the aesthetic event, not simply a setting for the human narrative.



14. Richard Long, *Walking a line in Peru*, (1972).



15. Richard Long, *A circle in the Andes*, (1972).

In the second half of the twentieth century the distinction between art and nature becomes increasingly contested. The interrogation of the point at which land becomes landscape raises questions regarding where the artistic engagement of the site begins and ends. The debate has become the locus for some of the most exciting artistic explorations of the second half of the twentieth century.⁶⁷

⁶⁷ Andrews, M (1999, p. 201).

The English artist Richard Long, one of the pioneers of Land Art, began a series of works in the early 1970s [Figure 14 & 15] that consisted of not representing the landscape, but rather inhabiting it – walking in it, arranging stones, sticks etc, as a memento of his presence there, or a way of distilling his experience of it. He also brought elements of that place into the gallery (natural materials, foot and hand prints, etc), seeking to impart not a view of a distant landscape but a trace of the tangible experience of being in it. What his work achieved through this process, alongside other artists like Robert Smithson, was to challenge the concept of landscape art. This new modulation was not seeking to represent landscape but to engage directly with the environment. By literally dragging parts of the environments he explored into the gallery, they dramatised the art/nature dialectic by evoking in a raw and direct way what the gallery could not contain; in doing so, it summoned other dialectical associations – inside/outside, culture/nature, self/other.

Land Art and Earth Art in the late 1960s and early 1970s manifested in many diverse forms. These include the works of Smithson, Michael Heizer, Christo and Jeanne Claude, Antony Gormley, etc. It varied from large scale earth works of artists such as Smithson and Heizer, that required construction equipment and considerable resources, environmental performance works by artists such as Mark Boyle,



16. Walter De Maria, *New York Earth Room* (1977), long-term installation at 141 Wooster Street, New York City.

accumulations of largely unmediated raw materials within gallery confines, such as Walter De Maria's *New York Earth Room* [Figure 16], to the ephemeral interventions of artists such as Long and Mark Singer, and more recently of artists such as Andy Goldsworthy.

Whilst there is no single thread that unifies these diverse approaches (indeed, some had markedly opposing political views regarding the ownership of land for the purposes of art⁶⁸) Land and Earth Art re-positioned the artist's relationship with art and landscape. They removed the frame, and reduced the distance or sense of detachment associated with traditional landscape aesthetics.

Building on these traditions, there is now an ongoing genre of site-specific interventions and installations, including the work of Canadian audio and installation artist, Janet Cardiff. In her sound works she takes the participant on walks around cities and well-known buildings, elucidating the significance of these sites through the participant's headphones. In *Her Long Black Hair* (2004) she takes each listener on a winding, mysterious journey through Central Park's 19th-century pathways, retracing the footsteps of an enigmatic dark-haired woman.

Relayed in Cardiff's narrative style, *Her Long Black Hair* is a complex investigation of location and physicality, interweaving stream-of-consciousness observations with fact and fiction. The walk echoes the visual world as well, using photographs to reflect upon the relationship between images and notions of possession and loss. As Cardiff's voice on the audio soundtrack guides listeners through the park, they are occasionally prompted to pull out and view one of the photographs. These images link the speaker and the listener within their shared physical surroundings of Central Park, shifting between the present, the recent and the more distant past.

⁶⁸ For further discussion see Andrews (1999, p. 214).

2.12 Permeability.

The inter-relationship between human and natural boundaries, evidenced in the work of contemporary artists like Cardiff, is intensified by a group of artists for whom the intertwining or permeability of human and natural worlds forms a central theme in their practice. Their work is significant in re-positioning the artist/viewer/participant in direct relation with the environment, often seeking to achieve a conscious participation or merging with it, which departs radically from the position of the detached viewer in traditional landscape aesthetics.

Ana Mendieta and Pipilotti Rist are two artists that investigate how the body can be immersed in the landscape, using specific sites, or via digital technology. Artists such as Charlotte Davies and Olafur Eliasson, construct artificial environments in order to focus specifically on the intersection or over-lap between body/perception/environment. Belinda de Bruyckere and Juul Kraijer use natural elements applied to or blended with the body to evoke emotional or psychological states.

2.13 Ana Mendieta

Ana Mendieta's *Siluetas Series*, [see Figure 17, *Untitled* from the series] executed in Iowa and Mexico between 1973 and 1980, deals with the idea of the body, or the body's outline/silhouette, being fused with the landscape. She was an exile from Cuba at a young age, and her work has often been interpreted as dealing with ideas of identity, absence and loss through the critical agendas of multi-culturalism, post-colonialism and feminism. The works were site-based and ephemeral. The process of creating a template of her own body, and then radically erasing this outline through various techniques (including earth removal, burning, covering with blood, mud, plants, twigs, flowers, etc.) was repeated many times. The action was manifested in a multitude of ways, and photographically documented, and almost always with an unmistakable female form or outline, often with the distinct posture of upheld arms, strongly connotative of a ritual or goddess figure. Whilst Mendieta's work was seminal in its body/land fusion, and she was clearly interested in dissolving boundaries between the human and the natural, these hallmarks – the naked female form, totemic outline, and vestiges left on the land often resembling a vulval form – contextualize her work strongly within the specific areas of cultural identity and feminist critique. In reference to the particular interests of my own research, the use of a readily identifiable female form highlights the importance of de-sexualizing the body in order to discuss the human in terms of its relationship with the natural sphere, and not as adjunct to the anthropomorphic notion of the earth as feminine. Philosophers such as Judith Butler and Luce Irigaray have explored these anthropomorphic notions of the earth as culturally inscribed and as part of a 'phallogocentric economy'.⁶⁹



17. Ana Mendieta, *Untitled* (1976), from *Siluetas Series* in Mexico, printed in 1991.

⁶⁹ For further discussion see Irigaray, L 1993, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, Burke C & Gill GC (trans.), Cornell UP, Ithaca, New York and Butler, J 1993, *Bodies that Matter*, Routledge, New York.

2.14 Pipilotti Rist

Pipilotti Rist takes the dissolution of boundaries of the human body in another direction. She powerfully presents a body in flux. Using visual and aural mutability and fluidity (attained through digital, colour staining, distortion and layered perforation) to merge the body within an amorphous field, Rist eschews the conventional representation of the body as a concrete and discrete object. By deploying large-scale video installations in works such as *Sip My Ocean* [Figure 18], Rist immerses the viewer in a field of experience wherein the projected figure itself slides in and out of an immersive visual field.



18. Pipilotti Rist, *Sip My Ocean* (1996), audio visual installation (video still), Guggenheim Museum, New York.

There is a tendency here to associate with this body in flux, and identify with the object of the body Rist presents of herself. As Amelia Jones notes in her book *Self/Image*⁷⁰, this association acts as a bridge between the object and the subject, and the work can consequently generate a powerful sense of being connected with, and inextricable from, the surrounding environment, both in terms of the space that the object occupies, and the space that the subject is immersed in within the gallery space. Referring also to the theories of Vivian Sobchack and Laura U. Marks, Jones describes how the subject/object relations as prescribed by an optic visuality (as defined by the Cartesian notion of vision as disembodied⁷¹) are disrupted by the haptic visuality of contemporary cinematic, new media projects such as Rist's, where there is a confluence of image, screen, space, sound and body. In this new mode, other senses of embodiment are enacted that counterpose the Renaissance to modern conceptions of the subject as implicitly disembodied. This involvement and encompassing of the objective/subjective body acts to erode the boundedness of the finite object in Western pictorial conventions, and presents instead a relationship between the object and subjects, one that is implicitly mutable.

The use of Rist's own body, and the bodies of other's, in an explicitly gendered way, and often, as Rist herself admits, operating within a kitsch aesthetic⁷², places the work within a feminist agenda in a similar way to Mendieta's. The distinction between subject/object is addressed through the dissolution and merging of boundaries. However the identification of the body as explicitly sexualised to some extent counteracts this process by re-placing the image of the human back within the traditional optic framework where the body is perceived as something to be gazed upon and objectified, and therefore separate from the viewer/subject. Within the practices of these artists, this paradox may serve to further enrich the multiplicity of meanings and interpretations present in their work. For the purposes of my research however, it provides a significant point of departure. The body/landscape nexus in my work explores an inter-leaving of the human and the environmental as a fusion of two spheres, where the specifics of the body (gender, race, culture etc) are not signified.

⁷⁰ Jones, A (2006).

⁷¹ Ibid., p. 20.

⁷² Soll, A 2005, *Pipilotti Rist*, Von Boeckmann, S (trans.), Friedrich Christian Flick Collection & DuMont Literatur und Kunst Verlag, Cologne, p. 7.

2.15 Charlotte Davies

The work of Char Davies, particularly *Osmose* [Figure 19] and *Ephémère* [Figures 20 & 21], is a particularly good example of an artist's attempt to "communicate a subjective experience of the intermingling of interior self and external world, of body and nature".⁷³ As mentioned in the reflections on the work of Rist and Mendieta, the presence of the body as a recognizable 'object', (even via its absence in the case of Mendieta) can serve to reinforce the notion of 'body as object' that may be in question. Davies manages to evade this paradox by placing the viewer within immersive works such as *Ephémère* via digitised virtual reality. In this space she refers to the body via a confluence of the participants' own senses within a fluctuating visual field that melds natural phenomena – trees, rivers, subterranean passages, etc – with aspects of the body's interior – organ, blood vessels and bones.

Davies began her artistic life as a painter, and it was through her extreme myopia that she became increasingly interested in the overlaps between things, between viewer and viewed. The lack of apparent solidity of objects, the dissolving of boundaries within a luminous spatiality created by her own myopic vision led to an investigation of perception itself, and a desire to create a sense of spatiality where there is no split between the observer and the observed. Arriving at this observation through her own 'limited' sight prompted questions regarding being in the world:

*The withdrawal of the sense of sight – of the visual acuity that dominates the human relationship with the world and is tied to the Cartesian paradigm – allows another way of sensing to come forward, one in which the body feels space very much like that of a body immersed in the sea.*⁷⁴

The blurring, softening effect of myopia, where the distinctions between things – objects and what surrounds them – is confused, led Davies to series of paintings in the mid-1980s called *Espaces Interlacés* (Interlaced Space), which investigated spatial and conceptual ambiguity. The limitation of the two dimensional painterly picture plane, however, frustrated her desire to reconstruct a sense of being "encircled by horizon, of being sensuously, spatially enveloped" and led to her explorations using 3D computer graphics, and ultimately to computer animated virtual reality.

Osmose and *Ephémère* are immersive and interactive virtual reality environments that engage the participant in several ways simultaneously using not just sight, but breath, pressure and balance as well. They are distinct from their conventional VR counterparts, that deploy hand-based modes of



19. Char Davies, *Tree, Osmose* (1995), digital still image captured during immersive performance of *Osmose*.

⁷³ Davies, C 2003, 'Landscape, Earth, Body, Space, and Time in the Immersive Virtual Environments *Osmose* and *Ephémère*' in Malloy, J (ed.), 2003, *Women, Art and Technology*, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA and London England, p 322.

⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 322.

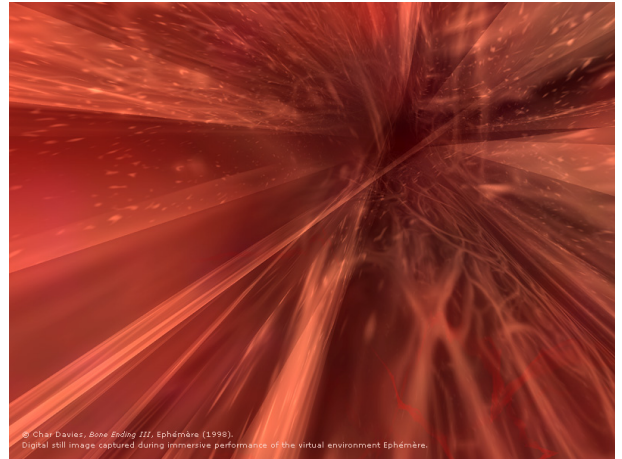
user interaction within a virtual environment comprised primarily of objects of hard-edged mimetic realism within an ‘empty Cartesian space’.

Instead, Davies employs transparency and shadows, and merges objects and space, and allows the participant to float, hover and manoeuvre within this ambiguous space, relying upon intuitive, instinctual and visceral response such as breathing and balance. She prefers to call these constructions immersive virtual space, and utilizes the digital space to create a sensation of being sensuously enveloped. In works such as these, perceptual boundaries between the inside and out may be experienced as permeable because the virtual is confused with the physical, and experienced as strangely real.⁷⁵

In *Osmose* she creates a virtual spatial structure consisting of several abstract realms using natural elements such as a stream, clouds, forest, earth, between which the participant (or ‘immersant’- the term Davies prefers) can navigate using breath and balance. Sounds, shapes and direction are all affected by the immersant’s spatio-temporal context within the work.

In *Ephémère* the natural elements of trees, rocks and streams are intermingled with body organs, blood vessels and bones, and suggest a “symbolic correspondence between the chthonic presences of the interior body and the subterranean earth.”⁷⁶ More interactive than *Osmose*, landscapes transform into other landscapes or seeds may germinate when gazed upon for an extended length of time. The immersant traverses three different levels (forest landscape, subterranean earth and interior body) and witnesses transmutations of these various elements according to their verticality, proximity, speed of movement and steadiness and duration of gaze.

Davies’ aim is to “*remind people of their biological, spiritual, and psychological connection to the natural (rather than the human-made) environment and of the regenerative force and mythological ground of those connections.*”⁷⁷ There is a disturbing paradox that exists between Davies’ noted intentions, and the effect of creating immersion within the ‘supra-real’. As she notes when reflecting on the difference between her actual experiences in the place she inhabits in southern Quebec and their virtual representation:



20. Char Davies, *Bone ending III* (1998), digital still image captured during immersive performance of *Ephémère*.



21. Char Davies, *Forest Grid II* (1998), digital still image captured during immersive performance of *Ephémère*.

⁷⁵ Ibid., p. 325.

⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 322.

⁷⁷ Ibid., p. 328.

*This land is but a microcosm: worldwide, wild places of the earth are being dramatically altered due to a litany of human attitudes and actions. Meanwhile, public attention is being directed to the virgin, untrampled territory of cyberspace. And what of virtual reality? Can virtual representations of nature return our attention to the nonhuman living world – conversely increasing our appreciation of the complexities of the natural environment? Or will virtual environments proliferate at the inverse rate of the disappearance of the real – as some sort of psychic compensation? Perhaps the very act of creating virtual environment such as Osmose and Ephémère points out the danger that soon computer-generated simulations may be all that we have left.*⁷⁸

2.16 Olafur Eliasson

The work of Olafur Eliasson is of particular interest to me, not only for his concern with how perception of ‘landscape’ can be transformed into an immersive environment, but also for the philosophy that underpins his practice. The idea of the ‘living edge’ is fundamental to his work, described eloquently in the following passage about *Notion motion* [Figure 22], in which the viewer’s participation is an essential component of the work:



22. Olafur Eliasson, *Notion motion* (2005), MI spotlights, tripods, water, projection foil, wood, nylon, & sponge. Installation view, Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, on loan from H+ F Mecenaat.

Located fully in neither the object nor the actions of the subject, the piece is situated instead in an elastic unfolding ‘between the spectator and the machine’- in experience. Ultimately Notion motion proposes an evocative cancellation of the line along which each body understands itself as apart from its surroundings, a reduction of our estrangement from a now more fully enveloping universe. Eliasson describes his works as “devices for experiencing reality,” and that reality is not to be found either inside or outside the body. It lies at the living edge between the haptic self and a heterogeneous

⁷⁸ Ibid., p. 341.

*and constantly changing universe, in an encounter somewhere between a concrete event and a luminous apperception. What the works compel, then, rather than any settled endpoint, is a process of negotiation. The philosophy posited by Notion motion stands at the heart of Eliasson's entire enterprise, which at its core coheres clearly and powerfully as a serious argument for an embedded and exhilarating being in the world.*⁷⁹

The idea that we are all inextricably entwined with the environment that surrounds us is designed in his work to empower and humble – it seems to suggest that we have the potential to affect our environment through our perception, but that the environment is also indivisible from us. The work of Eliasson prompts the viewer/participant to question the normative or habitual processes of perception by creating devices and environments that instil a heightened sense of the self in the act of perceiving.



23. Olafur Eliasson, *Room for one colour* (2005), monofrequency lights, Malmö Konsthall, Sweden. In connection with *The light setup*, Lunds Konsthall, Sweden, 2005.

In the work *Room for one colour* [Figure 23], Eliasson, deploys a chemical response in the human retina that creates an afterimage of the opposite colour to the one to which it is responding. In a room that is saturated with yellow light emanating from a ceiling hung with a bank of monofrequency bulbs⁸⁰, the viewer is immersed in a three dimensional field of yellow light. Neurologically, the brain/eye reacts by compensating for the lack of other colours in the room, which produces the effect of seeing a white wall outside the installation room bathed in a deep purple. This effect, like many in Eliasson's constructions, is reliant on the spectator's visual processing being intrinsic to the aesthetic experience. Thus it can be understood in a very compelling way that the artwork is not the object in the outside world, and it is not purely within the mind of the viewer. Rather it is a simultaneous interaction between the spectator's mind and the outside world; an intra-action that cannot exist independently of the agencies involved. In this way, his work epitomizes the proposition that the human and non-human worlds are inextricably intertwined and that this interconnection can be expressed as a single interconnected space. By placing the viewer in a principal role of the aesthetic production of the artwork:

⁷⁹ Grynsztejn, M (ed.) 2007, *Take your Time: Olafur Eliasson*, Thames and Hudson, New York, p. 18.

⁸⁰ The explicit exposure of the apparatus in the production is a trademark of the artist; the objective being to expose the mechanics of the 'experience' and thus ask the viewer to question their own perceptions of what is 'real' and what is manufactured.

Eliasson thus makes the spectator's visual processing part of the aesthetic equation, opening the space of his work to the generative working of human vision and in turn interweaving body and room, 'external' events and 'internal' sensations. Meanwhile the work of art itself becomes the interface between the site and subject and an emergent property of both. As Maurice Merleau-Ponty wrote on perception generally, 'The properties of the object and the intentions of the subject.... Are not only intermingled; they also constitute a new whole... it is impossible to say which started first in the exchange of stimuli and responses.' Room for one colour invites us to see that the substance of experience is not prescribed but rather corporeally enacted from moment to moment, a realization that is subsequently available for transposition to the world at large. This perceiver-dependent world – proof positive of our capacity to influence what influences us – makes us aware that if reality may be in part a given, we can continually negotiate and widen the field of possible experience.⁸¹

2.17 Belinde de Bruyckere

The work of Belgian artist Berlinde De Bruyckere offers an insight into another way in which human and non-human entities can be inter-related. It is a hallmark of De Bruyckere's haunting sculptures to fuse non-human forms (for example horse carcasses or plant forms) with human elements such as flesh/skin, and through this juxtaposition, address the perennial human themes of suffering, birth, death, remembrance, hope, etc. These hybrid forms are at once bizarre and eerily familiar. The existential concerns, which are central to her oeuvre, are invested into the contorted fragments of animal body parts and vegetal matter that she deploys in such works as *Marthe*, 2008 [Figure 24] and *Inside me III*, 2012 [Figure 25] which are typical of her practice. The humanising metamorphosis is achieved by the posture and treatment of the non-human elements, often covering them with flesh coloured wax, and placing these objects in cradles or with blankets that emphasise their vulnerability and fragility. Highly influenced by Renaissance painters such as Lucas Cranach the Elder, De Bruyckere is interested “*man's mental state which is evoked by the visible body*”⁸². She follows the tradition of using the human form to represent an emotional or mental condition, much as Christ's body was used in Renaissance painting to evoke a subjective response of suffering, contrition, compassion etc. in the viewer, but instead replaces the human with an animal form, often that of a dead horse. These fragmented forms, mostly headless, or without



24. Berlinde De Bruyckere, *Marthe*, (2008), wax, epoxy, metal, wood and glass, 280 x 172.5 x 119.5 cm, Saatchi Gallery, London.

⁸¹ Grynstejn (2007, p. 15).

⁸² Berlinde De Bruyckere: *We are all flesh* 2012, Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne.

feet or limbs, are used to embody human emotions. In this sense they anthropomorphise nature, and tap into the powerful visions of mythological transformation from classic literature such as Ovid's *Metamorphosis*.

It is via these influences and techniques that she addresses themes of fear, suffering, passion, loneliness and faith. Works like *Inside me III*, are of particular relevance as they use elements from the non-human world, such as branches and twigs, and with their treatment of wax and pigment, and their presentation, assume human qualities, and we are induced, Cranach-like, to share the suffering or other emotion that they represent. What interests me is the compelling nature of these human/natural combinations, and understanding the underlying intention that is crucial to their outcome. Consequently when she uses the horse in her work, it is specifically for its relationship to the human:

*I only use animals in a human way. The most important images for me were the abandoned city [of Ypres after WWI] and the dead bodies of horses. I took the dead horse as a symbol for loss in war, it's about losing people. I wanted to translate that feeling so I started to work on six portraits of dead horses. Some years afterwards when people were asking me about other animals in my work, I said 'no'. I need the horse because of its beauty and its importance to us. It has a mind, a character and a soul. It is the closest to us human beings. I couldn't imagine another animal being so important.*⁸³

The relevant distinction to be drawn with my research is that between anthropomorphism and symbiosis. The use of the natural as a way of exploring the human in De Bruyckere's work reflects her primary concern with the human condition. In this sense it is anthropomorphic. The difference between this approach and the research undertaken here is that the latter seeks to combine the human and the non-human to explore the symbiotic or mutual inter-relationship between the two, not to subsume one to the other. It is interesting however to note that the human tendency to identify with another animal or environment via oneself (in other words, to anthropomorphise) is a key element in many non-western cultures that have developed a more mutual relationship with their environment. From this one may infer that to perceive the world animated by human-like forces is to foster a more intimate, empathic relationship with the non-human.



25. Berlinde De Bruyckere, *Inside me III* (2012), wax, wool, cotton, wood, epoxy, iron armature, 135 x 235 x 115 cm, collection of the artist.

⁸³ Ibid., p. 9.

2.18 Juul Kraijer

Similarly, in the drawings of Juul Kraijer, elements of the natural world are invested into the human body in the form of a simile.⁸⁴ Kraijer's works such as *Charcoal on Paper*, 2001, [Figure 26], are rendered with charcoal and pastel, creating surreal images of the human figure fused with non-human elements.

The drawings have a soft quality, resulting from traditional modelling techniques of charcoal drawing, rubbing and wiping, and combined with the often *contrapposto* pose of the figures, recalling classical representations of the human figure. Associated sensations are triggered within the viewer via images of the body being morphed with creatures (frogs, fish, owls, ants etc), plants (trees, thorns, etc), or geographical features (volcanoes, valleys, the sea bed etc).



26. Juul Kraijer, *Charcoal on paper* (2001), 100 x 140 cm, Museum Overholland, Netherlands.

Kraijer's works possess an evocative power that harnesses deep-held responses to the natural world, in conjunction with the ability of the human form to express a psychological disposition. These amalgamations exist within a surreal or dream-like context, and use the expressive potential of the female figure's posture – crouching, prone, spreadeagled, supine – to conjure an emotional response within the viewer.

Kraijer states:

*The drawings are decidedly not representations of situations existing in reality. Rather they are incarnations of frames of mind. The bodies are nude but neutral – vehicle rather than flesh. They remain in the domain of the spirit.*⁸⁵

Despite the neutrality that Kraijer claims, the use of the naked female form, embedded with images of nature and landscapes, conjures specific connotations of “woman as nature and the excluded other”⁸⁶. It seems to draw an ineluctable correspondence between the female and nature as entities that are wild, needing to be subjugated. In a slightly different way to De Bruyechere's work, Kraijer's amalgamation of the naked female form with ‘nature’ highlights the difficulty of this combination if the history of the inscribed body is to be avoided.

⁸⁴ Kraijer, J 2004, *Juul Kraijer, Drawings*, Phillip Morris Holland B.V., Netherlands (insert text).

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

⁸⁶ Merewether, C 1997, ‘the Unspeakable Condition of Figuration’ in Bond, A (ed.) 1977, *Body*, Bookman Schwarz, Melbourne, p. 155.

2.19 Endnotes

This chapter has examined some of the key influences, both philosophical and aesthetic, that have underpinned the way Western thinking and art represent the self/body as disconnected from the natural world. The way human activity impacts on the globe through environmental change, reflects this paradigm. These impacts are now in turn affecting the way we perceive our relationship with the environment as one of interconnection. This new understanding is being explored in current ecological and philosophical theories. Following the pioneering work of Goya and Turner, the relationship between the human and the natural as interconnected continues to be explored in the visual arts. Beginning with the groundbreaking environmental art movement of the late 1960s, subsequent artists such as Davies and Eliasson, have explored the boundaries of the body and the environment and how our perceptions, both physiologically and psychologically, affect how we respond to the environment. The following chapter will examine my own research in this area, and trace the development of a methodology that aesthetically merges the human with the non-human as a means of visualizing this relationship as not just inter-connected but intra-active.

Chapter 3 – METHODOLOGY

This chapter explores how the interrelationship between the body and the environment is explored as a visually interconnected space in my experimental painting series, *Lachrymal Lake* and *Heartland*, and in the mixed media series, *Biopsies*. The aim of these works is to develop aesthetic formulations that integrate the boundaries between the body and the environment, creating a double yet singular space where the two are intertwined and mutually affective.

An essential tool in realising this aim has been experimenting with visual ambiguity – between the lines that divide inside from outside, the body from the environment, the viewer in relation to the viewed. Opposing the rigid delineation between discrete forms that Cartesian space proposes – separating the viewer from the viewed, body from mind, human from natural – the use of ambiguous forms and perspectives counters this segregation between things. Visualizing the two-way flow of things into each other, one space into another, suggests forms and environments that are based on mutuality, reciprocity, and intra-activity, rather than separation and autonomy.

3.1 Background - *Weathermonger*

A few years ago I began exploring the psychophysical connections between the body and the weather. It seemed that I was privy to a generational shift where for the first time the sky changed from being something perennial, eternal, heavenly and pure, to something marred and potentially hazardous. The ozone had holes in it, the clouds, the rain, drought, storms, floods, and tides all now seemed to implicate us, globally. Not only did science find the flaws but also the cause – us. The atmosphere, in short, could no longer be seen as other, separate or untainted. Looking at it, our complicity is mirrored back.

I started examining the qualities of weather around me – its patterns, individual clouds, atmospheric phenomena, satellite images, fog, etc – and how these different aspects of the weather were perceived, and the psychological impact they produce, both from a phenomenological and a social perspective. I looked more closely at how the sky and weather have been represented in art, both in the west and elsewhere. Concomitant with this process were the increasingly frequent reports about the weather: news articles, studies and reports on climate change, raising awareness and anxiety, inevitably altering the way we view the sky. At this point I began work on a project called *Weathermonger* that focused on the idea of our impact on the weather, our desire to control or make it, and the conceit inherent in this concept.



27. Catherine Woo, *Blue Sky Project – make my day* (2008), mixed media on aluminum, 240 x 960 cm, collection of the artist.

During this time I developed a technique that allowed me to mimic the appearance of clouds, creating images reminiscent of satellite imagery. This technique was useful in exploring ideas about

the fragility of this thin skin of blue light around the planet we call the atmosphere, and the deep black of space beyond. Of primary concern here was the depiction of the sky as not something eternal, as traditionally presented in landscape paintings from the Renaissance onward (with connotations of heaven, God, life eternal (elsewhere) etc.) but of a thin membrane; which, far from being eternal is fragile, mutable and intimately connected to human activity.

3.2 The problem – too much distance

What became apparent to me in this work was that the depiction of clouds at a distance was doing just that - keeping them at a distance, and running the risk of the work being viewed as simply picturesque or romantic. Whilst these images were of the sky and the atmosphere and not the land, these depictions were essentially using the same aesthetic apparatus deployed in traditional landscape art. Even though they shared some of the immersive, atmospheric qualities pioneered by Turner, and the installation *Blue Sky Project – make my day*, 2008 [Figure 27] to some extent immersed the viewer via the scale and multiplicity of imagery, the problem remained: the separation between the viewer (the human) and the object (the cloud), seemed to thwart a more intimate exploration of the dynamic between the two.

As a consequence I began seeking ways to visualize this inter-relationship more explicitly. I did this initially by questioning where the environment begins and ends in relation to the body. From a scientific and phenomenological viewpoint, it does not. It is in us, and part of us, we are inextricable from it, and it from us. The concept of the body and weather as a process of interaction evolved from this understanding. The aim then was how to close this *perceptual* gap, and to find ways to merge or fuse parts of the body with the environment that could visualize this physical interrelationship. This, and the philosophical implications inherent in this connection, became the primary focus of the research.

By exploring the connection between the sky and our perception of it, and the increasing awareness of our environmental impact, led to questions of perception per se: How *do* we perceive the environment? How has this changed in recent times? In what way does culture/belief affect this perception? What became apparent through this questioning process was that the normative view of the landscape as something ‘out there’, beyond the body, was not ‘natural’, but formulated by deep streams of influence running through the history of Western culture.

Research into some of the foundational concepts of Western philosophy, noted in Chapter 2, clarified the mind/body, divine/human, nature/culture dialectic, and how this dualistic model has engendered a metaphysical detachment from the natural world. This fundamental bias in Western thought has fostered the illusion that we are not part of the world that we inhabit, that we can objectively stand apart from that world, as spectators. The history of landscape painting in Western art can be seen as a visual record of this spectatorial view.

The dualistic tendency to view the world as an outsider, as separate from one’s habitat, has certainly affected how we respond to and treat the environment; it may also have contributed significantly to the massive impact of industrialization and production that are now revealing their long-term effects on the planet. There is some irony in the fact that it is the pervasiveness of these successes that has resulted in the current environmental situation, which has made the connection between body and

environment tangible again – by the polluted air in our lungs and the new environmental diseases that invade our bodies.

It is this nexus – the region of interaction, both physical and perceptual, between the human and the natural – that provided the basis for the research. As the research hypothesis earlier states: if the perceptual separation between the body and the environment is cultural and not biological, then it follows that visualising their fusion rather than separation may assist in reformulating the relationship between them.

Skin, as the boundary of the human body, can be considered as a line of demarcation or separation emblematic of the Cartesian view – allowing us to exist as separate entities in empty space. With skin as a starting point, this boundary is used as a way to revise the conceptual process of separation: by blurring this boundary between the human and the natural, and transforming it into a threshold of interaction and reciprocity rather than a line of separation. In this way the human and its surrounding environment (non-human nature) can be seen as integrated parts of a unified entity.

3.3 Rational for methodological approach

As noted this project builds on previous research so as to test the hypothesis that the interrelationship between the human and the non-human can be aesthetically re-formulated. It is based on the proposition that if the dualistic system that splits the human body from the natural world, and the human subject from the non-human object, is collapsed, then the body and landscape can be re-presented in a single interconnected space.

This is achieved by adopting an immersive visual aesthetic that reformulates the oppositional approach of inside and outside, human and nature, replacing it with a reciprocal space. In spatial terms: ambiguity replaces singularity; immersion replaces detachment.

The research project applies this concept of interconnected space by:

- 1) Simulating an immersive visual field that includes the human and the non-human; where what is inside the body becomes synonymous with what is outside the body;
- 2) Redefining the status of the landscape in relation to the human body by integrating the two, developing aesthetic strategies to merge the landscape with the body so that they become visually integrated;
- 3) Representing the inter-relationship as mutually defining.

3.4 Description of methods

The research began by seeking ways to visualize the boundary between the body and the landscape as an interconnected field where the two exist in a single fused space. It sought an intermingling of internal self and external world, where delineations between the body and the environment are integrated. Possible alignments were established between various elements that could be seen as mutual or shared. These included: *air/breath*; *water/tears*; *land /skin*.

Various experiments were conducted combining aspects of the body with aspects of the non-human environment. These undertakings were in themselves successful, and still hold potential for future projects, and included audio-visual experiments that aligned falling droplets of water with the beating of a heart, and a cloud that moved with the human breath. It became apparent however that the scope of the project was too broad, and the range of focus needed to be narrowed. The research parameters were re-defined to include only two of these alignments – *water/tears; land/skin*.

3.5 Bruises and skin

*Just as the skin is an ambiguous, shifting border between ourselves and the world, between percipience and perceptibility, so too our skin paradoxically protects us from others and exposes us to them. How we touch and how we are touched affects us.*⁸⁷

The first point of departure was a series of paintings that investigated images of bruises as a means of fusing the human with the non-human. Here the intention was to vastly increase the scale of bruises on human skin, such that they exceeded the human body. Experimental paintings were carried out, using a combination of stone, pigment and acrylic. Calcium carbonate and crushed marble were used to create a surface that appeared like skin and stone at the same time. The aim was to evoke a sense that the contusions were simultaneously part of the environment and the human body, thus conflating the personal sensation of skin with the non-personal apprehension of the environment [see Figure 28].

Technically and aesthetically these experiments proved successful: they achieved the objective of enlarging a personal ‘sensation’ (bruising) into a physical material and transposing that in a scale beyond the human. However, the common associations of bruising with personal, often domestic, violence gave rise to other agendas that were not relevant to the project. Whilst the evocation of personal pain, writ on a relatively monumental scale, could potentially have the effect of correlating an individual’s recollection of pain with the larger pain inflicted on the environment, this connection seemed oblique, and the overriding effect of the bruises on a large scale was a combination that digressed from the central concerns of my research.

Skin however, remained a primary component in my experiments, and it was eventually another conjunction of this human organ with the non-human environment that resulted in a more effective metaphor.



28. Catherine Woo, *Bruise* (2010), mixed media on paper, 194 x 133 cm, collection of the artist.

⁸⁷ Cataldi, S 1993, *Emotion, Depth and Flesh*, State University of New York Press, Albany, p. 145.

3.6 Tears

Salt water is a fluid common to the human body and the environment. On this basis experimentation was conducted using sodium chloride and salt mimicking substances such as ground glass and silica as painting media. Places in the body and the environment where this fluid naturally occurs were explored as analogous sites.

In the small reservoir for tears in the human eye, the Lachrymal Lake, I discovered a site that was rich with associations that would become central to the research. Residing both in the body (as an anatomical feature) and also outside the body (as an actual salt lake), it can be seen as simultaneously occupying both – a double interconnected space. It is made of materials common to both: water, and salt, and the natural pink colour commonly found in salt lakes connects it the flesh of the body. Salt is a common, naturally occurring chemical, but only humans cry emotional tears. As such the lake also provided multiple associations of sadness, aridity, desolation, and environmental degradation.

Initially I explored the possible ecology of this metaphorical place – who/what would inhabit it, what would grow there, what were its constituent materials, etc. It was a site where multiple metaphysical co-incidences could occur, suggesting the merging, blurring of boundaries between the self and the environment.

3.7 Camouflage: figure in the landscape

I then entered a rather complex terrain where I used the Lachrymal Lake as a site within the human body that was in turn occupied territory. At the time I was reading Michel Serres' *'The Natural Contract'*, which as noted previously, presents a concept of humanity being at war with nature.⁸⁸ Serres advocates that, just as it has been social contracts that have brought order to human relations, a 'natural contract' is needed to restore balance and reciprocity in the relationship between the human and the natural.



29. Image of military camouflage.

This prompted an investigation into the use of camouflage as a means of exploring both the idea that there is conflict (if not open warfare) present in our relationship with nature, but also provided a way to enmesh the figure in the landscape. It presented a conjoining of opposites – camouflage as a tool of war (against nature) with a melding with the environment (a 'becoming'⁸⁹ with nature).

As a form adaptive to the environment, camouflage subsumes the figure into its immediate surrounds. This seemed to offer an aesthetic means to blur the boundaries between the body and its habitat and to enmesh the figure into the environment.

⁸⁸ See Serres, M (1992).

⁸⁹ See Leach, N 2006, *Camouflage*, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Massachusetts.

In the work *Retreat* [Figure 30], I was interested in the evocative nature of a very delicate ecology growing out of a military helmet, which provided an unmistakable symbol of war. Fragile foliage, typical of marginal plant species common to salt lake areas, were covered in fine crystals of pinkish glass and attached to the helmet as a form of camouflage, which was at once absurd and beautiful. It conjured an image of a soldier having to move with extreme care to keep his camouflage in tact. The development of this ‘character’, his various accoutrements, and the environment these objects would inhabit, was pursued.



30. Catherine Woo, *Retreat* (2010), glass, twigs, army helmet, acrylic, 25 x 35 x 20 cm approx, collection of the artist.

This led to an exploration of sites – firstly as an installation – a room filled with salt where the possessions of the absent figure of the ‘soldier’ are found. This site was conceived as existing within the lachrymal lake, in turn within the human eye, creating a circular metaphor to explore human/natural interrelations. In this way I was attempting, through a series of inversions, to depict a place that is simultaneously both exterior to and within the body; where the human is found in a vulnerable and marginal state, exposed to thirst and desolation, but the site is within the self. The strong figurative component and the unequivocal evocation of war, however, were too explicit and overwhelmed the primary aim, which required a subtler intertwining.

3.8 The Pink Lakes

At this time, I made a field trip to the Pink Lakes in north-western Victoria [Figure 31], a place I had visited some years earlier, and which had left a profound impression. During this field trip, I spent five days on the lake, camping on its fringes, walking over it, and documenting the vastness and the minutiae of this unique environment.

The contrasting qualities of harshness and fragile beauty, typical of arid landscapes, were striking: simplicity and detail; vulnerability and stamina; mundanity and transcendence. The homogeneity was also impressive. The absolute singularity of the salt, stretching in a sheer, glittering plane from one side of its vast expanse to the other, has an otherworldly, almost surreal quality. It is an entirely natural formation⁹⁰, and the effect of walking over it is akin to walking on a frozen lake. The apparent solidity is undercut by a disturbing sensation that at any moment the surface will crack and give way to an abyss.



31. The Pink Lakes, in the Murray-Sunset National Park, Victoria.

⁹⁰ Occupying a low point in a vast territory, salt that has arisen from an ancient seabed has collected in these lake beds, and formed a thick crust of salt over deep black mud trapped underneath.

3.9 Caught in the fabric of the world.

The salt itself was a source of fascination. Crystals of salt, gradually leaching from the ground and the atmosphere in extreme environments such as this salt lake, encrust any resident object over time [Figure 32]. This encasement can be seen as a form of embracing between the two – the object and the environment – or a blurring of the boundaries that hold them apart. The gradual unfolding and flourishing of these crystal formations, seemed to resonate with Merleau-Ponty's notion of the body being phenomenologically enfolded in space – "*caught in the fabric of the world*".⁹¹

This natural process of gradual efflorescence and crystallisation on any object that remains still enough, seemed to embody the 'invisible': it could be seen to literally enact the concept of metaphysical 'flesh' that was central to the later work of Merleau-Ponty. This idea proposed that there is no separation between the subject and the object; the two exist in a single interconnected space.

This physicalisation of the abstract concept of 'flesh' afforded a way for the body to become truly *invested* in the environment, rather than placed onto it in a pictorial way. It provides a visual metaphor for the '*the undividedness of the sensing and the sensed*'⁹² – an embodiment of interconnected space, between the object and subject.

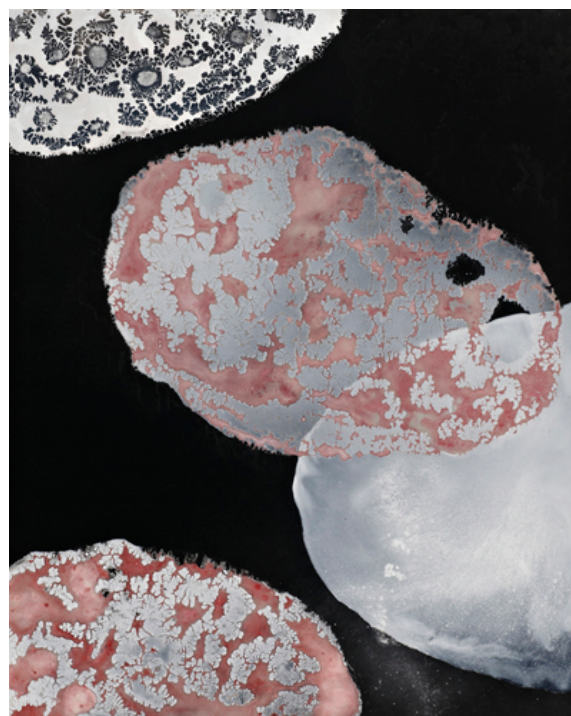
3.10 Colour and scale

There was an intuitive attraction to the lake as well, based upon its colour.⁹³ Since the trials with the *Bruise* paintings, I was aware of the effect of using the colours of skin in conjunction with a beyond-human scale. Rendering skin on a macro- or micro-scopic scale, allowed a human/natural conjunction to be made without the issues associated with the recognizable human form, as discussed in Section 2.16.

The effect of being on a vast pink expanse, the skin of the lake, generated a kind of perceptual inversion of scale, a phenomenon probably triggered by the micrographic images of skin that I was researching at that time. What this inversion offered was a way to consider the surface of the lake and the surface of skin as mutual.



32. Salt encrusted plant form on the lakebed.



33. Catherine Woo, *Lachrymal Lake no. 6* (2010), mixed media on canvas, 120 x 97 cm, collection of the artist.

⁹¹ Merleau-Ponty, M 1964, 'Eye and Mind', in Ross, SD 1984, *Art and Its Significance: An Anthology of Aesthetic Theory*, State University of New York Press, p. 291.

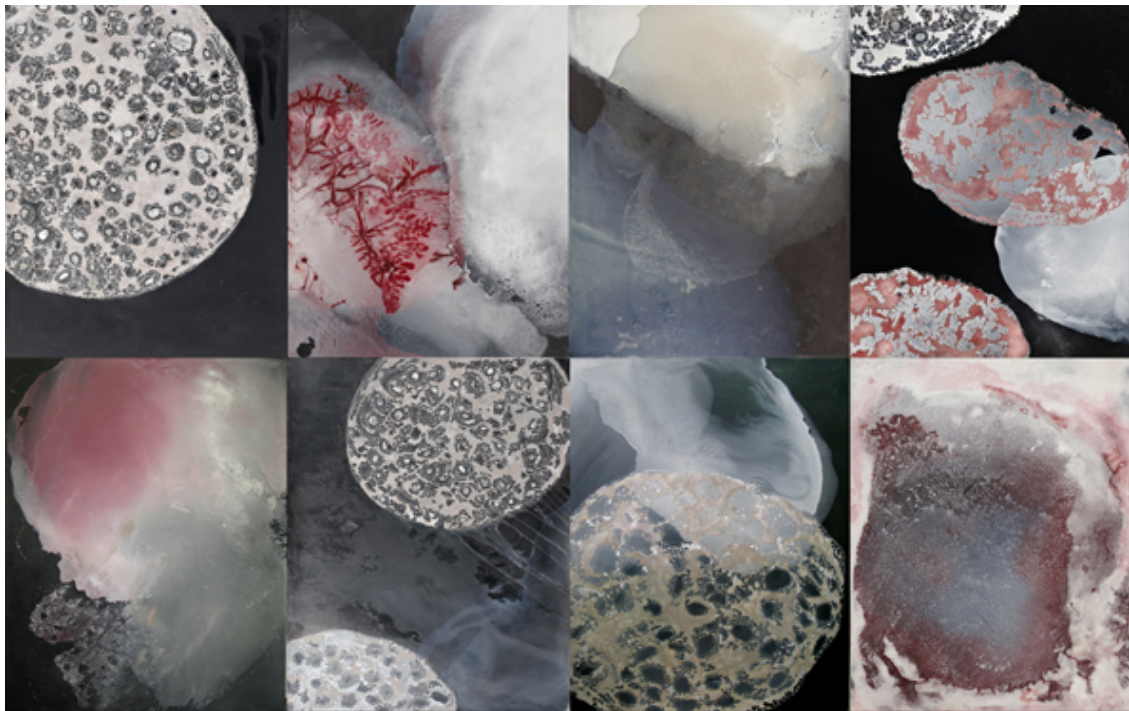
⁹² Merleau-Ponty, M (1964, p. 163).

⁹³ A green micro-algae called *Dunaliella salina*, common to salt beds, has the ability to produce large amounts of beta-carotene, which accounts for the pink colour of the lakes.

3.11 Lachrymal Lake

This ambiguity of scale prompted new ideas of how the human and natural could be fused to form a unified entity. As mentioned earlier, it is difficult to present the naked human form, or even part thereof, without sexualising it, and consequently becoming subject to a feminist or humanist reading. Indeed one of the most important distinctions between my research and others in the field is the intention to not read a figure at all, but rather perceive a *process* where the human and non-human co-exist within a reciprocal space.

Perceiving the lake as part of the body and experiencing the scale of the environment was a turning point in the research. It suggested an ambiguity between the environments that could function as a signifier of both simultaneously. This led to a series of painterly investigations – initially with a series on *The Lachrymal Lake*, and then extending beyond this specific site, to other sites in the body – the cells, skin, heart, kidneys, lungs – that extended this ambiguous space.



34. Catherine Woo, *Lachrymal Lake 1-8*, (2011), mixed media on canvas, each 120 x 97 cm, collection of the artist.

Consisting of a series of twelve mixed media paintings, 120 x 97 cm, which have been exhibited in various combinations [e.g. Figure 34] and a triptych called *Float* 150 x 316 cm, these first experiments examined the Lachrymal Lake as a space both inside and outside the human body. Alluding to actions and interactions between organic forms that can be perceived on either a microscopic or macroscopic scale, these bone or flesh coloured forms floating in dark space are reminiscent of cells in the human body, plant forms, or inter-galactic structures. Their fluctuating, ambiguous shapes are suggestive of states of constant change, and the viewer is immersed in a space either inside or outside the body.

3.12 Material meaning

The materials and methods were an intrinsic part of this process and essential to the work's meaning and interpretation. The use of fine, milky veils and intricate organic patterns allude to a state of transformation, and of bodies/states/environments that are not independent from one another but rather in a phase of perpetual and subtle intra-activity. Using raw materials that possess particular qualities of their own – calcium carbonate, kaolin, black sand, mica, carbon etc – the materials are allowed to flow into each other, layer, crack, and reticulate in ways that are unique not only to the materials themselves but to *their interaction with each other*. This is reflective of not just the methodology but of its aim: *it is not a mimetic representation of interaction, rather an embodiment of it*. [For example see Figure 35].

The deployment of materials as symbolic of interconnectedness has been a core part of my practice for many years. It was however not until this current body of work that the more specific implications of these physical interactions became evident. It highlighted not only the importance of acknowledging the physical integrity of the materials, and how they interacted, but also the tangibility of these processes. In other words, to be able to witness these processes, and perceive the properties of the materials caught in a state of suspended animation (or suspended interaction), is intrinsic to the making and interpretation of the work. If, hypothetically, these processes were shown as photographs, or simulated via another means like photo-realistic painting, the personal involvement of the viewer with the work would be fundamentally different. By sensing, literally, the nature of the work, it moves from a conceptual framework to a visceral one. The comprehension of the work changes with the viewer's proximity to the surface, and is related to the understanding that the patterns/forms/structures are not manufactured, but *immanent* to the nature of the work.

Acknowledging matter in a state of perpetual flux and co-responsiveness counters the traditional Cartesian view that objects, including us, are separate, static and existing in 'empty space'. The visualization of the in-between-ness of things is therefore essential to assert an alternate visual paradigm, and rests upon using fusion instead of separation; ambiguity versus clarity.



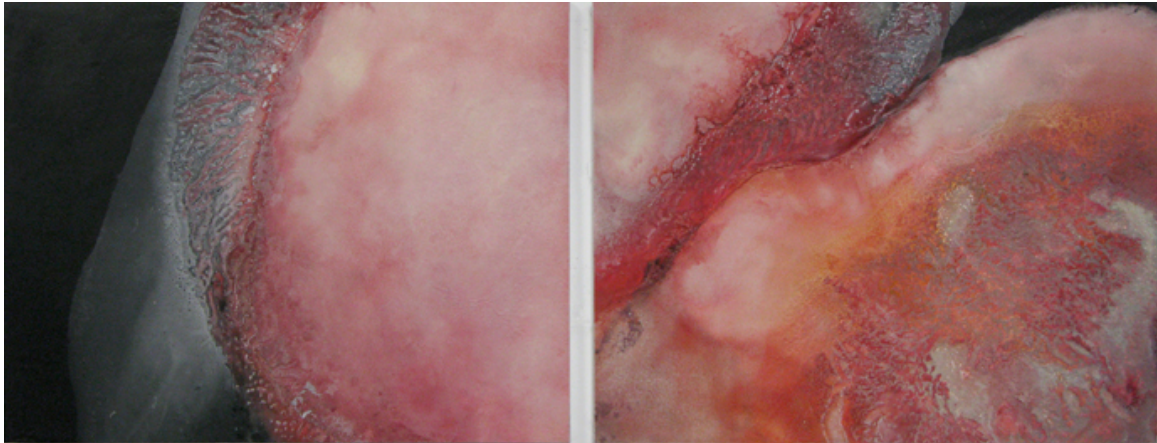
35. Catherine Woo, *Reservoir*, 2011 in progress.



36. Catherine Woo, Hobart Studio, 2011.

3.13 Edges and boundaries

For these reasons, it became increasingly important to emphasise the edges of things: the boundaries between objects in this abstract space are not defined barriers but membranes whose physical extent is not bounded; a mutable threshold. The subtle and complex structures are defined by intricate interiors that extend outward, and the ‘living edge’⁹⁴ of these forms is irregular, variable and shifting. This ‘edge’ phenomenon, where the boundaries of things become blurred, suggesting a morphing or coalescing, is evident in the diptych *Merge* [Figure 37] and also in *Lachrymal Lake no. 2* [Figure 38].



37. Catherine Woo, *Merge* (2011), mixed media on canvas, 97 x 250 cm, collection of the artist.

On one side of *Merge*, a large singular form is seen in profile, with an aureole or halo. Filaments or tendrils are disintegrating or integrating into the surrounding space. It is an intermediate veil between the organism and its habitat, reminiscent of the translucent fin of an aquatic animal or plant. In the panel on the right, the forms are fusing together. With the distinctly human flesh colours, there is a latent sexual reading also present in this work, of two human forms becoming one, which may accentuate the notion of human/natural imbrication, where human and non-human processes overlap and interchange. Certainly though, it is the realisation of a form as mutable and in a process of exchange with the environment around it, including other forms close to it, that reflects the central concerns of the thesis.

As mentioned previously, by shifting the emphasis away from clearly defined forms, typical of Cartesian spatial concepts and Albertian perspective, and using blurring, translucency and mutability as key elements, a different view of the environment and the relationship of the human within it is visualized.



38. Catherine Woo, *Lachrymal Lake no. 2*, (2010), mixed media on canvas, 120 x 97 cm, collection of the artist.

⁹⁴ Grynstejn (2007, p. 18).

3.14 *Heartland*

From the investigation of the salt lakes, and the material experimentation that followed, a new series of works evolved that expanded these mutable spaces. These new experiments centred on the convergence of scales of different entities. Building on the initial studies of *bruises* (Section 3.5) coupled with the ambiguous sensation of a vast geographical site (the salt lake) redolent of the body (skin), the new work focussed on an inversion of scale where there is simultaneously a sense of being inside and outside of a place, or inside and outside of the body. These experiments sought to extend this sensation by the visual confluence of an organ within the body with the earth's terrain [for example see Figure 39]. This approach was also applied to smaller multiple works such as *Change of heart – 30 days*, [Figure 40].

By merging the scale of the body with that of a geographic site, a transformation of the figure/landscape dichotomy can occur, where the distinctions between body and landscape become blurred, and there is instead a single entity with a double meaning. The aim was to magnify the human element to such an extent that it could be interpreted as something beyond the body, and the materials and processes that constitute it are read simultaneously as geophysical *and* anatomical.

A crucial aspect of my practice is that materials are selected and used with reference to their elemental properties and characteristics. As previously discussed in the section on *Material Meaning* above, this methodology has been designed as a way to fuse the environment within the human forms, and vice versa.

Through the use of diverse natural materials (calcium carbonate, gravel, sand, clay, rust, ochres, mica etc) set in action through the use of 'natural forces' (agitation, seepage, dripping, poring, gravity, cracking, resistance, etc), a mode of human/non-human interplay is activated. Processes and materials that mimic the dynamic forces that shape heterogeneous matter in the natural world are used to create forms and patterns that are 'natural'.



39. Catherine Woo, *Reservoir* (2011), mixed media on canvas, 194 x 133 cm, collection of the artist.



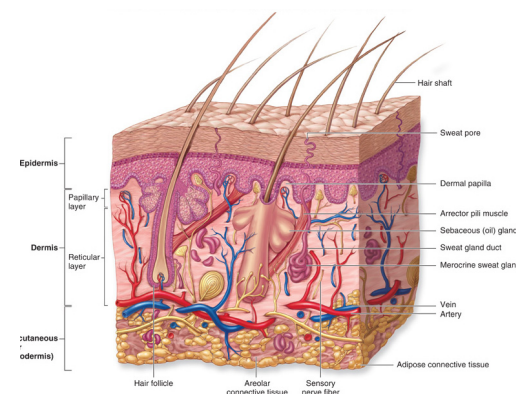
40. Catherine Woo, *Change of heart – 30 days* (2011), mixed media on paper, 30 pieces @ 64 x 50 cm, overall 192 x 500 cm, collection of the artist.

By using these processes, and indeed by the fact that these effects are achievable in no other way than to work in collaboration with nature, the human forms (of heart, lungs, etc) are imbued with the raw materials, and are constructed by processes that are, in essence, environmental. The patterns – of divergent rivers or veins; reticulated dendritic, fractal forms; or of clouds of matter propelled by unseen systems of energy – are universal in nature. They denote permeability and change on a macro level, and refer simultaneously to these fundamental processes on a micro level, as discussed in the section *Edges and Boundaries*.

Manifesting these forms on both microcellular and geographic scales – and thus, both inside and outside of the body – reiterates an underlying commonality to all forms of life, and the inseparability of the human from these essential processes. As a form of collaboration with nature, these processes also support the philosophical model that underpins the research.

3.15 Skin

Concurrent with these experimental paintings, I was also examining the structure of human skin and investigating its physiological function [Figure 41]. Skin is the primary interface of the body with the outside world – a place where our bodies meet the environment, but also a place where a boundary apparently divides us from it. It is however, more like a threshold than a barrier. The skin is an organ that is in constant contact with its habitat, continuously affected by its surrounds: it is nourished or poisoned by the air; it constantly responds to changes in temperature; and its very form is held by the pressure of the air that surrounds it. Indeed, the idea that we are distinct, independent and detached from the environment is contravened as soon as we move the body away from its specific locus on the earth. Down a few



41. Diagram of the epidermis.

hundred metres, the pressure is so great that the body is crushed, too far up, with not enough pressure, the body expands, and falls apart. The body, all bodies, are thus held in place by the invisible biosphere; they are made whole, and ‘natural’, by something seemingly absent.

At this time I also examined skin fascia [Figure 42], which, on a micro-cellular level, reflects the same patterns of intra-corporeality that is a core theme of this project. The function of the tissue relies upon a shifting, mutable and interconnected environment where order arises from the apparently chaotic and formless, and which highlights the ability of the skin to act as a mutable and permeable membrane and not a barrier.⁹⁵

For these reasons, skin has become an important vehicle in the research to explore issues of permeability and inter-connection with the environment.

Tangle [Figure 43] is an abstracted vision of this dynamic process. It shows remarkable similarity to the microcellular forms in Fig. 42, but was made prior to discovering these in vitro images of skin fascia, which is perhaps indicative of the universality of these structures, and the essential, underlying principles of strength in flux, and order within chaos.



42. Dr Jean-Claude Guimberteau, *Strolling under the skin*, image of skin fascia captured from *in vitro* video footage.



43. Catherine Woo, *Tangle* (2011), mixed media on canvas, 194 x 133 cm, collection of the artist.

⁹⁵ Dr Jean-Claude Guimberteau, a leading plastic and reconstructive surgeon, and author of several books on in vitro investigation of skin fascia, discovered the microvacolar system is comprised of a network of collagen fibrils that at first sight appear to be chaotic, but in fact construct a system of remarkable order and efficacy. For further information see: Guimberteau, J, <http://www.guimberteau-jc-md.com/en/Books/strolling/accueil.htm>

3.17 Biopsies

Delving into this world under the skin, and perceiving it as a responsive *environment*, not merely a borderline, brought about a shift in the research, and led to a series of experiments called *Biopsies*.

The ambiguity of form and scale in the previous two series of paintings was used as a way to depict spaces that were either inside or outside the body. Thinking of the skin as not simply a surface in contact with the outside environment, but as a human environment in itself, had the effect of deepening the involvement between the two spaces; and opened the possibility of extending this terrain in both directions – deeper into the skin, and deeper into the environment. This prompted an analogous modelling of the two terrains integrated as a single site.



44. Catherine Woo, *Salt Lake – biopsy* (2011), dried plants, glass, pigment, sand, acrylic medium, perspex, 50 x 50 x 22 cm, private collection.

In this series [Figure 44, 45, 46], the skin membrane has been translated into an interstitial space – between the human and the non-human environment. Comprised of the upper dermal layer of the human skin, it is also a ground out of which plants grow. The plant forms are reminiscent of salt lake vegetation, or coral, or a forest under frost. They branch out from the surface of the skin, but are embedded in the substrata of the flesh like hair follicles. They are simultaneously part of an epidermal layer of the human body, geological substrata, plants, and hair, suggesting an inseparability between the human body and the environment, and can be read as biopsies of the body or core samples of the earth.

By merging these spaces and plant forms invested with human attributes, a kind of fusion takes place, where there is no longer a division between the human and the non-human, but a physical imbrication of the two.

This was a significant development in the research, as it united the various intersecting concerns and techniques, and provided a way to embed the human and non-human elements within a single integrated environment, suggesting a *biospheric intra-connection*. At the same time it afforded a way of involving the viewer in this metaphorical environment in a more concrete, physical way: there is no longer the option to view the work as representing either the body or the environment – they are now fused in a single form, and that form exists within the viewer's own space.



45. Catherine Woo, *Salt Lake – biopsy II* (2012), dried plants, glass, pigment, sand, acrylic medium, perspex, 61 x 61 x 16.5 cm, collection of the artist.

The main distinction here is one of viewpoint, or perspective – how the viewer is positioned in relation to the work, and how this determines a sense of immersion. The spatial concept in the *Lachrymal Lake* series [Figures 33, 34, 38] relies upon ambiguity – the abstract images can be read as macroscopic or microscopic – and the forms can exist either inside or outside the body. The main concern was to evoke a sense of reciprocal processes between mutable forms, and portray this intra-active process as fundamental to all life forms and matter.

In the *Heartland* series, a human organ, such as the heart [See figure 39], is amalgamated with a larger geophysical entity such as a lake. These elements are merged together by the convergence of their scale and physical properties and can be read as geological or anatomical. There is a conceptual ambiguity here: between seeing an image of a heart and perceiving it as part of the human body; then seeing an aerial view of a lake, and perceiving that as part of the earth. Both of these perspectives require a conceptual leap – journeying through the body or through space.

The distinction between these experiments and the *Biopsies* series is that in the latter the viewer is present with the actual terrain. It is a metaphorical terrain, and it is presented as a fragment, but is indicative of a larger environment. As the title suggests, the biopsy is a sample taken from the body, like a core sample taken from the earth, but this time the sample is of the body *and* the earth. The geological strata is not rock and sediment but instead the flesh of the body; the plants do not have roots, but are rooted in the flesh like hair follicles. The difference with this approach is that there is no more ambiguity – it is no longer a case of reading it as either the body *or* the environment, inside *or* outside the body. The two are now inextricably fused in an intra-active process, and the three-dimensional model evokes it is an extension of the viewer's own environment.

Alluding to a scientific methodology heightens this immersive effect. Presenting the cross section of the body/earth within a vitrine is suggestive of analysis within a laboratory – testing, dissection, categorisation, etc. This indicates a process where the subject has been sampled and brought in for examination. In doing so, these works refer to a system of deductive reasoning and Cartesian logic that the research first sought to re-evaluate. The paradox is that it places an alternative view of mutuality under the same form of scrutiny that it critiques. This is instructive in that it perhaps underscores the impossibility of ever being sufficiently outside a system to which the subject belongs to fully and objectively understand it. Consciousness of the system requires immersion in it; being immersed in it means you cannot objectify it.⁹⁶



46. Catherine Woo, *Salt Lake – biopsy* (2011), in progress.



47. Catherine Woo, Studio UTAS, 2011.

⁹⁶ As Abram notes: “[B]y disclosing the body itself as the very subject of awareness, Merleau-Ponty demolishes any hope that philosophy might eventually provide a complete picture of reality (for any such total account of “what is” requires a mind or consciousness that stands somehow outside of existence, whether to compile the account or, finally, to receive and comprehend it). Yet by this same move he opens, at last, the possibility of a truly authentic phenomenology, a philosophy which would strive, not to explain the world as if from outside, but to give voice to the world from within it, recalling us to our participation in the here-and-now...” Abram, D (1997, p.47).

3.18 Endnotes

The three works discussed in this chapter, *Lachrymal Lakes*, *Heartland* and *Biopsies*, explore ways to close the gap between the viewer and the ‘landscape’ in order to engage with our changing relationship with the environment. This perceptual gap is exemplified in the tradition of the framed landscape painting; the visual binary of the detached seeing subject and the distant viewed object. In order to integrate the viewer and the viewed, the works involved experiments using painterly processes and painterly mixed media, deploying two principal aesthetic devices to achieve this integrated space – ambiguity and immersion. While each of the works are linked by the primary concerns of the project, they are distinct in the following ways:

1. *Lachrymal Lake* paintings: Fundamental processes of intra-activity, mutability and reciprocity.
2. *Heartland* paintings: Conflating the scale and form of human and environmental natural features such that the image is microscopic (and the viewer is immersed in the body), or macroscopic (and the viewer is immersed in a vast terrain).
3. *Biopsies* vitrines: Fusing aspects of the human and non-human into a three dimensional metaphorical terrain that brings about an integration of the two environments.

Chapter 4 – CONCLUSION

4.1 Extent to which aims have been fulfilled

The aim of the research was to explore how the interrelationship between the human and natural world is understood in art, and how this changing relationship can be visualised in painting and painterly mixed media. It investigated the ways in which the sense of detachment from the environment has been reflected (and promulgated) in conventional pictorial modes of landscape painting in Western art, and how this knowledge can be utilised in visually re-formulating this relationship to better reflect new understandings of the human and non-human interaction.

The theoretical research led to a deeper understanding of the philosophical foundations that underpin the disconnection between the human and non-human worlds. The proposition that human detachment from the environment is embodied in the convention of landscape art where objects are represented as separate things in empty space was transformed in the experimental research by inverting this relationship. Instead of empty space, the space in between things became materially activated: edges were blurred; defined forms became mutable; spaces were fused together. Perceptions of being immersed in the body and immersed in the environment overlapped through the conflation of scale and form. The perceived separation of human and non-human environments was overcome by creating a new environment where the two become a single entity. Thus the gap separating them was closed.

4.2 Analysis and interpretation of outcomes

The main contribution made by this research was in formulating a model of how the human and non-human worlds are inextricably linked, and visualizing this in painterly mixed media. This has been achieved by enmeshing the interior bodily processes of the human with the exterior non-human environment, visually merging the two worlds. In so doing the relationship is re-formulated as not simply between static co-existent entities, but as a new singular formal entity. This form is constituted of mutual processes that integrate the two spaces. The painterly methodology supported this outcome by incorporating heterogeneous matter in flux; materials and forms in apparent negotiation with each other, analogous to the inseparability of the human and the non-human.

4.3 Strengths and limitations of the research

Whilst the research demonstrated visual solutions that are specific to the research aims and contributes to the field in a way that is unique and innovative, they are initial experiments. Finding an aesthetic solution that effectively addresses the issues, and communicates them in a way that is both visually compelling and cogent, is challenging to say the least. By limiting the research to the field of painting is apposite in the sense that painting, and in particular landscape painting, has not only provided a clear record of the changing relationship of humans with their environment, but has been instrumental in defining and influencing this crucial relationship. In this respect, it is valid to address and re-formulate the relationship within this field, and in so doing utilise existing tropes to re-configure the conventional figure/landscape paradigm.

One of the limitations of proceeding in this manner however is that paintings themselves exist within an established framework. They are not just objects, but ‘art objects’ that are conceptually

set apart from the rest of the world, and bring with them a pre-existing set of values and practices from which they are inextricable. As such, they are readily subsumed into the world of discrete entities that the research set out to critique. Thus the established painted object framework can potentially undermine the intention of the work.

In this sense the choice to re-formulate visualizations of the human/natural inter-relationship within an existing visual paradigm supported the aim by critiquing these conventions from within. At the same time this reformulation can potentially be undermined by its inherent nature as a set of aesthetic objects existing within a conventional artistic milieu.

The other main limitation of using painterly media in this research is the two-dimensionality of the painterly picture plane. In addressing human perceptual detachment from the environment, and issues surrounding mind/body, nature/culture dualities, a possible approach would be to dispense with the picture plane altogether, and address these issues in a three dimensional and immersive environment. Of course, to simply ‘immerse’ a viewer in an environment will not necessarily overcome this sense of detachment. As discussed previously (Section 2.15), some ‘immersive’ environments can reinforce rather than redress the Cartesian spatial paradigm. Within the field of painting however, the images produced reveal how the human and non-human environments can be re-configured as a unified form. The new topography of the *Biopsies* series is possibly the most successful in addressing the stated aims, as this formulation demonstrates most clearly the human and non-human worlds enmeshed together in a mutually entwined condition.

4.4 Relationship of new knowledge to existing research

Whilst there has been a considerable amount of experimental research in breaking down conventional views of ‘landscape’, particularly in the field of land art and site based projects, there has been very little research into visually re-defining the inter-relationship between the human and non-human world as an intra-active process; a relationship defined by mutuality and reciprocity. The research highlights the way the body and landscape have been traditionally depicted as two separate entities that simply come into play by being put in the same scene. The research reveals that on the contrary, the human body and natural landscape are defined through their interaction with each other. Goya and Turner pioneered this intra-active definition of human bodies and landscape. Eliasson and Davies dramatically advanced this by visually investigating the inextricable connection between the human and non-human form. Eliasson’s method primarily relies upon triggering in the viewer an acknowledgment of the intrinsic relationship of experiencing the world using internal processes. Davies achieves this via virtual reality where viewers journey through an artificial environment that blends internal and external worlds. My research explored ways to visually re-configure this relationship as a new visual and conceptual topography that merged both forms. It transformed demarcation into merging; clarity into ambiguity; observation into immersion.

The research was concerned with the way that the natural world and environmental issues have taken on a central role in the contemporary consciousness, presenting a field of inter-relational experiences that can be utilised to undertake an interconnected modelling of these relationships. The project advanced knowledge on the following three fronts:

- 1) The artistic formulation of the human and non-human inter-relationship as an interconnected process;
- 2) The testing of the formulation through a painterly research project that expresses this interconnection in visual form;
- 3) An explanation of this inter-relationship as a mutual space.

4.5 Recommendations for future research

This research could be further developed in several ways, including:

1. Further theoretical research into other historical and cultural modes of representing the relationship between the human body and its environment. This could incorporate an examination of the absence of clear distinctions between body and environment in other cultures. An investigation into the conception of body and land in Australian Aboriginal art and culture, for example, could help elucidate other visual paradigms that explore this interconnection.

This could also include further investigation alluded to in Section 2.4 into methods used in practices such as Buddhist meditation to overcome perceptual habits, and how these practices could perhaps be incorporated into visualizations that integrate the body and the environment.

2. Further research could include deepening the visual enquiry that began with *Biopsies*. This could be developed in a number of ways including:
 - Development of this new topography to include other forms of hybridization between the human and non-human;
 - Increasing the scale and/or number of the objects, and placing them within a more ambiguous art/science environment;
 - Expanding the painterly fragment into a more fully immersive environment.

4.6 Summary of thesis

The research investigated how the dynamic interrelationship between the human and natural world can be visualized in painting. It identified the problem that the relationship between the human and non-human worlds is predominantly represented as co-existent rather than co-responsive, and that visualizing the relationship as an intra-active process required exploration.

It built its case by examining the main currents of thought in Western culture that underpinned the relationship as one between separate entities, typified in the philosophy of Descartes. It explored how this conceptual paradigm was iterated in the tradition of landscape painting in Western art, and how this mode of representation could be seen as a record of cultural response rather than a record of place. A survey of its development revealed the first major ruptures in the traditional paradigm of landscape painting by Goya and Turner, undergoing further radical changes through the environmental art movements of the 1960s and 1970s, which in turn instigated new formulations of the art and nature dialectic. The work of artists in the field, such as Davies and Eliasson, who are either seeking similar outcomes or using similar elements to my research, revealed areas of commonality and difference.

On this basis a methodology was developed, involving the deconstruction of traditional pictorial conventions that represent the human and natural as discrete objects, separate from each other. The combined theoretical and experimental research culminated in a body of work that presented an experimental approach to interconnecting elements of the human body with elements of the environment. Through the use of pictorial devices, such as ambiguity and immersion, the space in between these objects was activated. *By coalescing human and non-human elements, a new metaphorical terrain has been formulated that re-positions the relationship between the human and non-human worlds as intra-active, rather than static.*

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Appendices

List of Illustrations

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